



THE LIBERTY "BOYS OF '76"

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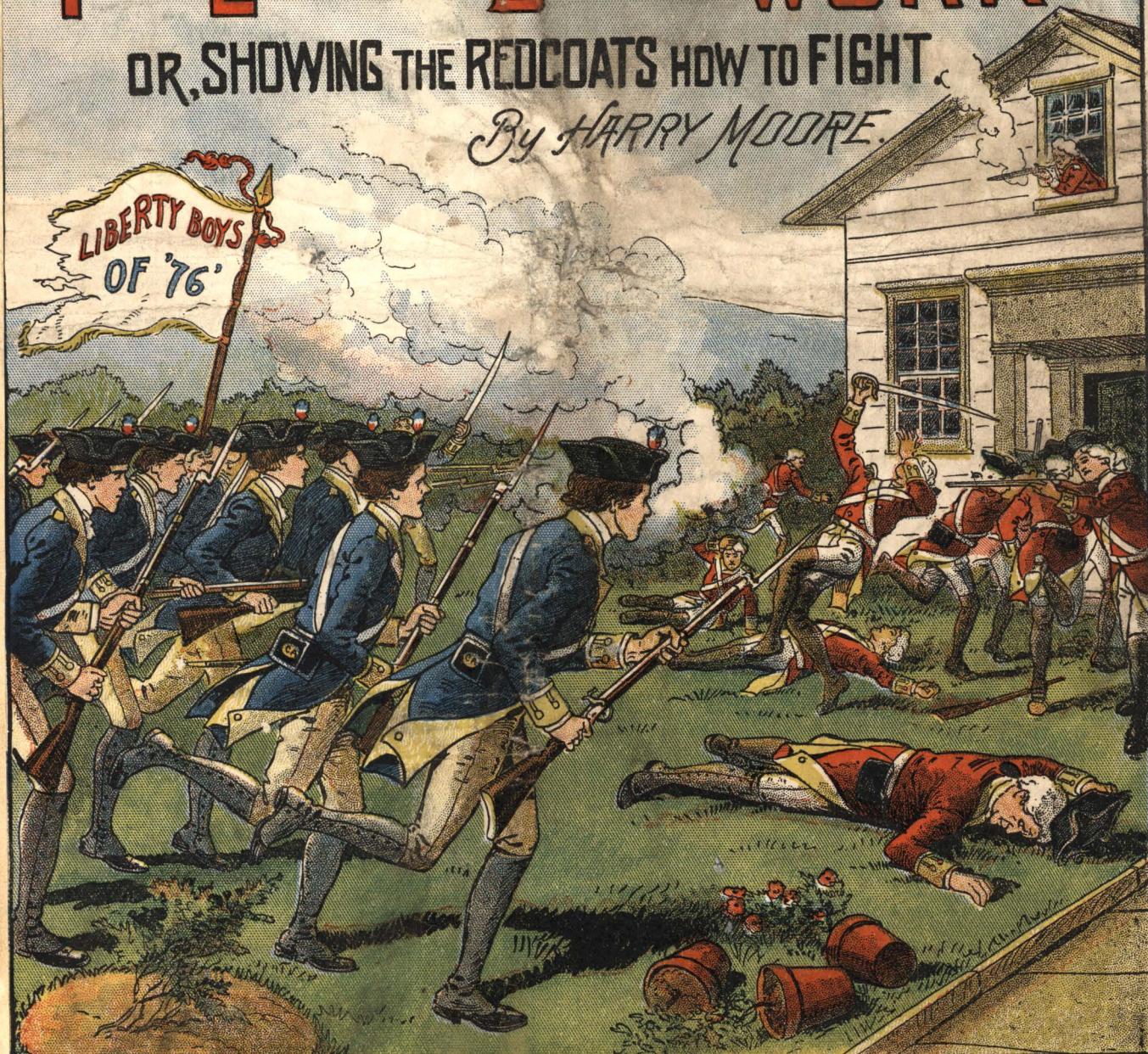
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CHAPTER I.

A SHOT FROM THE ROADSIDE.

One lovely afternoon in the early Fall of the year 1781 a horseman was riding along a road leading southward, toward Charleston, South Carolina. He was at a point about midway between the Santee River and the city.

The rider was a handsome, manly looking fellow, with keen gray eyes, firm chin, and long, brownish hair. He sat on his horse like a Centaur. He was dressed in the ordinary citizen's clothes of the period, and displayed no weapons, though it is probable that if an examination had been made it would have been found that he had some pistols concealed underneath the coat, for these were troublous times, and scarcely any one went unarmed. When we say that the horseman was the famous scout, spy and captain of the company of "Liberty Boys of '76," Dick Slater, the readers will not have any doubt that he was armed.

Dick was down in South Carolina on important business. General Greene had sent him to find Marion, the "Swamp Fox," and deliver a message to him. Marion was to be found in the swamps abounding in that part of the country, but just whereabouts in the swamps he was it would be difficult to say.

Suddenly the sharp report of a rifle rang out, and Dick's hat was knocked off his head. The bullet just grazed the youth's head; an inch lower and he would never have delivered the message to General Marion.

Dick Slater was an exceedingly shrewd and quick-witted youth. As the shot rang out, and he felt his hat leave his head, he half fell, half threw himself off the horse and dropped to the ground, where he lay still. This was a trick for the purpose of trying to draw his unknown enemy out of his ambush and it worked first rate. The instant the youth fell a man rushed out of the timber at one side of the road and approached his supposed victim.

Dick's horse had moved onward a few paces, and then stopped, so the youth was enabled to get a good view of the newcomer. He was not very favorably impressed. The

man was almost a giant in size, being at least six and a half feet tall and large in proportion, while his face was that of a villain, if ever a man had one. He was dressed in the ordinary hunter's costume, consisting of a buckskin coat and leggins and a coonskin cap. In the man's hand was a long rifle from the muzzle of which a thin wreath of blue smoke was still curling, proving that it was from the muzzle of this weapon that the bullet which came so near ending the days of Dick Slater had come.

When the man was within ten feet of Dick the youth leaped to his feet, and, pistol in hand, confronted the fellow.

"Hello!" greeted Dick coolly. "Aren't you just a little bit careless about where you shoot, stranger?"

"Waal, by thunder!" almost gasped the giant, stopping suddenly and staring at Dick in open-mouthed amazement. "I didn't miss ye, did I?"

"About an inch."

"I missed ye an inch?"

"Yes, you missed me, but you put a bullet through my hat."

The man stared at Dick wonderingly, and then held up his rifle and looked at it, after which he shook his head dubiously.

"I don't unnerstan' et," he declared.

"Don't understand what?"

"W'y missin' uv ye. I never done sech a thing afore." A peculiar glint appeared in Dick Slater's eyes.

"Oh, then you are in the habit of shooting people down from the roadside, are you?" he said coldly.

The man shook his head.

"No, I didn't mean that," he hastened to explain; "I meant that I never missed afore when shootin' at squirrels, turkeys an' everything like that."

"Oh, that's what you meant, eh?"

"Yas."

"And you never shot anybody down from the roadside?"

"Nope."

"Humph! Why did you shoot at me, then?"

The man hesitated. It was evident that he didn't like the question. He fidgeted from one foot to the other, and

it was evident to Dick, who was a good judge of expression, that the fellow was trying to think of some lie to tell that would sound plausible.

"Are you going to answer?" Dick asked, after waiting a few moments.

"Um—ah—w'y—ye see, I saw ye ridin' erlong, an'—I jes' ups and shoots at ye without thinkin'," stammered the rascal, and then he drew a long breath of relief and tried to look honest.

To his surprise, the youth whom he had tried to murder burst into a laugh.

"Say, do you know what I think?" asked Dick.

"No; whut?"

"That you are about the most original and cheerful liar that I ever saw."

An angry look appeared on the giant's face.

"Whut's thet!" he growled threateningly, taking a step forward. "Do ye darst tell me I'm er liar?"

"Why, yes. I don't think it takes much daring to talk to you in that fashion."

"Oh, ye don't, hey?"

"No."

"Thet's kase ye don't know me, young feller. My name's Joe Blodgett. Ever hear uv me?"

Dick shook his head.

"I can truthfully say that I never have heard of you, Mr. Blodgett."

The giant looked amazed.

"Ye heven't?" he almost gasped.

"No."

"Most people call me "Wolf" Blodgett—kase I'm sech er wolf when I git er-goin', ye know—an' mebbe ye've heerd uv me by thet name."

Again Dick shook his head.

"No, I've never heard of you by that name, either; but that is neither here nor there, and doesn't matter. I don't care who you are, nor anything about you. What I want to know is, why did you shoot at me?"

"I tolle ye."

"You tolle a big lie."

"Whut's thet?" cried Blodgett, taking a step nearer, but pausing suddenly when Dick shook the pistol in a threatening manner.

"You heard what I said," remarked Dick coldly, "and now I want to give you a little piece of advice. Don't take another step forward. I know your game as well as if you had shouted your intentions out loud. You are trying to get close enough to me to grab hold of me, and you think that your superior strength would enable you to get the better of me with ease. But you won't do it; I am not go-

ing to let you get any closer, and if you take another step forward I shall put a bullet through that thick head of yours."

It was evident that the giant was angry and disgusted.

"This heer is jest terrible!" he growled. "The idee uv me, Wolf Blodgett, er-bein' talked to in sech er fashion by er youngster without enny whiskers on his face is almost unbearable!"

"Oh, but you'll have to grin and bear it, whether you like it or not."

"But I'm er wolf, I tell ye—a great, big, howlin' wolf, an'—"

"Shut up, or I'll make you howl!" ordered Dick, shaking his pistol threateningly. "You're not half as big a wolf as you think you are, and before I get through with you will be willing to acknowledge that you come much nearer being a meek and inoffensive rabbit than a howling wolf."

It was evident that the giant was somewhat awed. He seemed to hardly know what to make of the youth. He started to say something, but the youth quickly shut him up.

"Don't talk till I tell you to," ordered Dick; "and then don't do anything but answer my questions. "Why did you shoot at me a while ago?"

The giant hesitated, but finally, after Dick had given the pistol a threatening shake and repeated the question, said:

"I wuz hired ter shoot ye."

Dick was genuinely surprised.

"You were hired to shoot me?"

"Yas."

Dick eyed the fellow sternly.

"Aren't you lying again, Blodgett?" he asked.

"So help me, I hain't!" the fellow replied. "I'm tellin' ther truth."

"And you say somebody hired you to shoot me?"

"Yas."

"Who was it?"

"I dunno."

"You don't know?"

"Nope."

"Why don't you?"

"Kase she had er mask on, an' I didn't see her face."

"She!" exclaimed Dick.

"Yas, she; thet's whut I sed, wuzn't et?"

"And do you really mean to say that a woman hired you to shoot me?"

"Thet's jest whut I mean ter say. Et wuz er woman—leastwise, ther person hed on er dress."

Dick hardly knew what to think. He was a pretty good judge, and decided that the man was telling the truth. It was a very mysterious affair, however. Who could the woman be? Why should she wish him killed? These questions flashed through his mind, and he decided to question Blodgett closely in the hope that he might get some clew that would unravel the mystery.

"Where did you see this woman?" he asked.

"At my cabin."

"At your cabin, eh?"

"Yas."

"Where is your cabin?"

Over heer in ther timber, erbout er mile erway."

"And this woman came to your cabin, you say?"

"Yas."

"When?"

"Las' night, jes' arter dark."

"And you say she was masked?"

"Yas; she hed er kind uv er white cloth thing pulled down over her head an' shoulders with holes cut inter et whur her eyes an' mouth wuz."

"Humph! and you didn't see her face at all?"

"Nope."

"What about her voice? Did it sound like that of a woman?"

"Yas."

"You are sure of that?"

"Yas; et wa'n't no man's voice."

"And this woman paid you to shoot me?"

"Thet's whut she did."

"What did she give you?"

"Two pounds in gold."

"Humph! you work cheap, don't you?"

"Waal, two pounds is er good deal uv money," was Blodgett's cold-blooded reply; "I'd hev ter kill er lot uv wild game to bring in that much."

It was quite evident that the cold-blooded wretch looked upon the affair from a business standpoint. He was a hunter, used to killing wild game and selling it for money, and when this mysterious woman came to him and asked him to kill a human being in return for two pounds in gold, he was quite willing to do it.

Dick saw that it would do no good to put his contempt for the fellow into words, so he smothered his feelings and went ahead with his questions.

"Did this woman say why she wished me killed?" he asked.

"Nope."

"She didn't say a word or give a hint regarding this?"

"Nope; she said ez how er feller named Dick Slater

would cum erlong ther road heer some time this arternoon, an' thet she would give me two pounds ter lay in wait fur ther feller an' shoot 'im, an' I sed I'd do et; thet's all I know erbout et."

Dick was amazed.

"Did she say the person she wanted killed was named Dick Slater?" he asked.

"Thet's whut she said."

This deepened the mystery. How had this mysterious woman learned his name and that he was coming down into this part of the country. These were questions which Dick could not answer. He had supposed that his coming was unknown to any one in that region and he had not told his name to a soul in South Carolina, but had given a fictitious name everywhere along the route. How, then, had this woman learned his name?

In the hope that he might learn something which would give him some clew to work upon, Dick continued his questioning.

"You have lived in this vicinity a number of years, have you?" he asked.

"Yas; I've lived heer more'n twenty years."

"I suppose you know nearly everybody in this part of the country?"

"You're right about thet, young feller."

"So I judged; well, now, I'm going to ask you if there was anything in the voice or manner of this woman which would enable you to give a guess regarding her identity? Think, now; and when you answer, be sure that you tell the truth."

Blodgett was silent a few moments, seemingly pondering, and then he replied:

"Nope; I culdn't give er guess ez ter who ther woman wuz."

Dick was silent a few moments, and then asked:

"Were you to see her again and let her know whether or not you had killed me?"

Blodgett shook his head.

"Nope," he said; "I tolle her I couldn't miss ye, an' thet ye wuz ez good ez dead, an' she seemed ter be satisfied."

"But you failed, just the same. I judge the woman would be somewhat disappointed if she knew it."

"I s'pose so."

"Now what shall I do with you?" asked Dick, abruptly.

"I dunno," was the reply.

"By rights I ought to put a bullet through your head, don't you think?"

"Not much, I don't think so! I didn't hurt ye, an' I don't see w'y ye sh'd wanter hurt me."

"But you tried to kill me; that you didn't succeed is only an accident."

The man nodded his head and a sober, almost frightened look appeared on his face as he said:

"I don' unnerstan' et. I never missed afore in my life; I take et thet et meens that ye air not fur me ter kill, an' I wouldn't shoot at ye erg'in fur all ther gold King George hez got. I'd be afeerd sumthin' terrible wuld happen ter me."

"And something terrible certainly would happen to you—if you missed!" said Dick, grimly. "I would blow the top of your head off!"

"Oh, I'd miss all right; I hed ez good er chance ter shoot ye ez I'd ever want, an' I missed. Thet settles et; I'd do ther same thing erg'in, an' ye may be shore I won't never try another shot at ye."

Dick thought a few moments. Although the fellow had tried to kill him, the youth did not feel like shooting him down in cold blood, and if he could feel at all sure the man would not make another attempt, he would be glad to let the fellow go, and Dick decided that it would be safe to do this. Blodgett was ignorant and superstitious, and was so impressed by his failure to kill the youth at the first attempt that he would not be likely to try it again.

"I'm going to let you go," said Dick; "but I give you fair warning that if you make another attempt to harm me I will kill you!"

"Ye needn't be afeerd; I won't try et erg'in," said Blodgett; "kin I go, now?"

"Yes, you may go."

"All right; so long!" and throwing his rifle over his shoulder, Blodgett turned on his heel and strode away, quickly disappearing in the timber.

Then Dick mounted his horse and rode slowly onward down the road.

CHAPTER II.

A BIG BLACK BEAR.

Dick rode slowly, for he wished to think over what had just taken place, and he could not ride fast and think clearly at the same time.

Who was the mysterious, masked woman who had hired Blodgett to kill him?

Why had she done it? Why did she wish him out of the way?

And how had she learned that he was coming down into South Carolina?"

These questions were all posers, and the more Dick thought of the matter the worse mixed he became. But as he kept on thinking his desire to solve the mystery and learn who and what the woman was, grew stronger and stronger. This was only natural, of course, and any one similarly situated would have been influenced the same way.

The young "Liberty Boy" was somewhat worried, too. If this mysterious woman knew who he was, and that he was coming down into South Carolina, might she not know also what was bringing him to the region? In that case it might be possible that her purpose in trying to accomplish his death was to prevent him from finding General Marion and giving him the message from General Greene.

However, it was idle to make surmises, and finally the youth dismissed the matter from his mind and urged his horse forward at a gallop.

It was quite late in the afternoon, and so when, ten minutes later, Dick came to a farmhouse, he paused and sat his horse and looked irresolutely on down the road and then at the house.

"It is within three-quarters of an hour of sundown," the youth thought; "and I may not find another house for miles. I have a good mind to put up here for the night—that is, if they will let me stay, and I am not much afraid on that score for the Southerners are certainly hospitable."

He hesitated a few moments longer, and then rode up close to the house and called out:

"Hello!"

The door was opened presently and a rather good-looking, buxom woman of perhaps forty years appeared.

"Good-evening, lady!" said Dick, pleasantly, doffing his hat and bowing; "I am a traveler and would like to remain over night, if agreeable."

"My husband is out at the stable, sir," the woman replied; "you had better see him."

"Thank you; I will do so."

Then Dick rode around the house and back to the barnyard, where a man was engaged in milking.

Dick dismounted and leaping the fence approached the man.

"Good evening!" he greeted.

"Good evening, sir!" the man replied.

Dick repeated the statement he had made to the woman, that he was a traveler and wished to remain over night, and the man said he was welcome to do so.

"It will never be said of Joe Thompson that he lacked hospitality," he declared; "I have never yet refused to keep any one who has applied."

"Thank you," said Dick; "I am glad to hear you say that. I will put my horse in the stable and feed him."

"Wait just a minute," was the reply; "I am almost through and will go with you."

The man finished milking the cow, and then set the pail down by the fence and went with Dick, the latter leading his horse into the stable. They placed the feed in the manger and then went to the house, Mr. Thompson getting his milk-pail on the way.

"Lucy, this is a young man who wishes to stay over night with us," explained the man; "let's see, what did you say your name was, sir?"

"Thomas Stone, sir," was the reply. This was the name Dick had given everywhere along the road, while coming southward.

"Mr. Stone is welcome," said Mrs. Thompson, pleasantly.

"This is Tom," said Mr. Thompson, indicating a boy of about ten years.

Dick greeted the boy pleasantly, and then the man said:

"Where is Nettie, Lucy?"

"I don't know," replied his wife; "she stepped out a few minutes ago. I guess she'll be back directly."

"Nettie is our daughter," explained Mr. Thompson. Then he told Dick to make himself at home, which the youth proceeded to do.

Mrs. Thompson busied herself getting the evening meal, and from time to time she spoke of the prolonged absence of Nettie, and wondered what could be keeping her.

"Perhaps she has wandered into the timber and gotten lost," suggested Dick.

But Mr. and Mrs. Thompson and the boy laughed at this idea.

"She knows every tree within five miles of here," said Mr. Thompson; "and there is no danger of her getting lost."

At last supper was ready, and all were just sitting up to the table when they were startled by a scream and a wild cry for help.

"That is Nettie's voice!" cried Mrs. Thompson. "Run, quick, Joe, and see what is the matter!"

Mr. Thompson leaped up and ran out of doors, but Dick was ahead of him. The scream had come from the direction of the rear of the house, and they had emerged by way of the back door.

It was dark, but the moon was shining brightly, it having come up at the same time the sun went down, and Dick and Mr. Thompson saw a sight which caused them to dart forward at full speed.

Fifty yards distant, and running toward the house at

the top of her speed, was a girl, and right behind her and not fifteen feet distant was a huge, black bear!

It was no wonder that the girl was frightened and had called for help. The bear was a monster, and was undoubtedly very hungry; otherwise he would never have chased a human being in such a fashion.

"Help! Help! Oh, save me, save me!" the girl cried again as she saw the two approaching.

"Never fear, we'll save you, miss!" called out Dick, encouragingly. "Keep right on going and we will stop the bear."

As he spoke he drew a pistol and cocked it. He kept running till he met the girl, and then as soon as she passed him he paused and took aim at the onrushing bear. The instant he was sure of his aim he pulled the trigger.

Crack! went the weapon, and with a fierce growl of pain and rage the animal reared up upon its hindlegs and came directly toward the dauntless youth.

"Look out!" yelled Mr. Thompson; "he's wounded and dangerous!"

Dick had seen more than one bear before this one, and killed them, too, and he knew just what to do.

Thrusting the empty pistol back into his belt he leaped aside, letting the animal rush past him, at the same time drawing another pistol.

Bruin saw that he had been tricked by the nimble-footed human enemy, and, stopping as quickly as he could, whirled and rushed at the youth with wide-open mouth and clawing front paws. Dick was not alarmed, however. He waited till the black nose was almost against the muzzle of the pistol, and then fired. He had taken aim at the animal's eye, this time, and his shot was true; the bear going down with a bullet in its brain.

"That's the time you fetched him!" cried Mr. Thompson, in delight; "you are a splendid shot, young man, and one of the bravest fellows I ever saw!"

"Oh, that wasn't much to do," replied Dick, modestly; "I knew I could get out of his way before he could get his paws on me."

"Not many would have the cool nerve to stand up and stick a pistol almost into a bear's face before shooting," said the man.

"I hope the young lady isn't injured," said Dick.

"Oh, no, sir; not at all," replied the girl for herself, she having paused and come back as soon as she saw that the bear had gone down. "I was frightened, that is all."

Dick regarded the girl curiously, and could see, even by the faint moonlight, that she was very beautiful. He imagined she looked rather searchingly at him as well.

"This is my daughter Nettie," said Mr. Thompson.

"Nettie, this is Mr. Stone, who is traveling through the country and wished to remain over night with us."

"I am glad to make your acquaintance, Miss Thompson," said Dick, bowing and extending his hand.

"And I—am glad—to make your acquaintance, Mr.—Stone," said the girl, somewhat stammeringly and in trembling tones. She started to take Dick's hand, then paused and drew back her hand, uttering a muffled sort of cry.

"I—thank you—for—saving my life," she said, and then without another word turned and hastened toward the house, where she was taken in her mother's arms and kissed and hugged.

Mr. Thompson could not help feeling that his young guest must be surprised by the queer actions of the girl, and said, in an apologetic voice:

"You will please excuse her, Mr. Stone? She once had a twin brother, Ned; he went to the war, joining Cornwallis' army, and was killed about a year ago. Ever since then Nettie has—acted queer at times. You will—excuse her?"

Dick grasped the man's hand and pressed it warmly and sympathetically.

"There is nothing to excuse, Mr. Thompson," he said, softly. "Lost her twin brother—poor girl!"

Then he turned to where the bear lay and took a look at Bruin.

"He is a big fellow, isn't he?" he exclaimed.

"Yes, indeed. And his hams will be good eating. I'll skin him at once and cut him up and then drag the rest of the carcass down back of the barn lot and bury it."

"I'll help you," said Dick.

Mr. Thompson demurred, but the youth would not listen to any objections. Perhaps the man thought his guest would not be able to render him any great assistance, anyway; if so, he was badly mistaken, for Dick quickly proved that he knew as much about such work as any one could know, and the two of them made quick work of it. They soon had the skin off and the hams cut out, and then these were carried to the house.

"We'll let the carcass lie where it is till after supper," said Mr. Thompson; "supper's on the table, you know."

Dick did not offer any objections to this way of doing, and as soon as they had washed their hands, all sat down to the table. Dick took a good look at Nettie Thompson, being careful, of course, not to let the fact be known, and was surprised to see what a wonderfully beautiful girl she was. He said to himself that he had never seen a more beautiful one in all his life. There was a sad look on her face, however, and at times a peculiar expression in

her eyes, nothing of which escaped the keen eyes of the youth.

The girl explained that she had gone out for a walk, and had gone farther than she intended, and that while hurrying homeward, and when only about a quarter of a mile from the house, had been given chase to by the bear. She had run with all her might, but was almost exhausted, and would have been overtaken by the brute before she could have reached the house, she declared.

"If it hadn't been for the coolness and bravery of Mr. Stone I don't know what would have happened," said Mr. Thompson; "I had no weapon, and could not have stopped the bear, or if I had done so he would have made an end of me mighty quick. One thing is certain, we owe either Nettie's life or mine to this brave young man!"

Dick blushed like a girl, and said that he had not done much, and that they would have escaped, anyway. He glanced at Nettie, and was puzzled by the look on her face. She seemed struggling with conflicting emotions. Looks of pleasure and of sorrow as well seemed commingled upon her countenance.

CHAPTER III.

THE MASKED WOMAN.

When Joe, alias "Wolf" Blodgett was permitted to leave, after having made the unsuccessful attempt to kill Dick, he strode through the timber at a lively pace. After a walk of fifteen minutes he came to a log cabin standing right on the bank of a little stream.

Blodgett entered without ceremony and looked about him. The one room of the cabin was vacant. He started to place his rifle in the corner, and then stopped and began, instead, to load the weapon.

"I don't see whut's ther matter uv me," he muttered; "I never went thet fur in my life afore without my rifle bein' loaded. I guess the missin' uv thet youngster a wile ergo hez completely upset me."

He finished loading the weapon and stood it up in the corner, and then he sat down and remained quiet for a quarter of an hour or more. His head was dropped, his eyes on the floor, and he seemed to be thinking of something very unpleasant, for there was a dark frown on his face.

After a while he got up, placed some bread and meat on a slab table at one side of the room and proceeded to eat his supper. He finished this, replaced what food was

left in a cupboard at one end of the room and then sat down and fell to pondering again.

He was sitting there in this position when suddenly he leaped to his feet with a muttered exclamation.

"Thet's her!" he murmured. "I thort she'd come—but I wish she hedn't!"

The next moment there came a knock on the door.

"Come in!" called out Blodgett.

The door opened and a woman entered. At any rate, the person wore a woman's dress, but the face of the visitor was hidden by a white cloth pulled down over the head and shoulders. In front were two holes for the eyes and one for the mouth, but not a glimpse of the features was it possible to get.

It was undoubtedly the mysterious woman Blodgett had told Dick about—the one who had hired him to shoot Dick Slater.

The man pointed to a stool. "Set down!" he invited.

The woman shook her head.

"No," was the reply, in a sweet, musical voice; "I haven't time. I came to hear your report. Did you kill him?"

There was a trembling eagerness in the tones, which showed the speaker to be strongly moved.

Blodgett hesitated. He did not know what to say; he hated to acknowledge that he had failed. Doubtless he feared the woman would want the gold back.

"You failed!" cried the woman, quickly. Intuitively she guessed from the man's demeanor that he had made a failure.

"I don't unnerstan' et, mum," mumbled Joe; "I hid by ther side uv ther road an' waited till he come erlong, and then I took good aim and let drive, but—I missed 'im. I never done sech er thing afore in my life, an' ez I say, I don't unnerstan' et."

"But why did you not fire again—with your pistols?" the woman cried, disappointment and anger in her tones. "Why did you give up after one shot?"

"I hed ter give et up, mum."

"Had to?"

"Yas."

"Why so?"

"Waal, ye see, et wuz this way: W'en I shot, ther feller tumbled off'n his hoss, an' I wuz shore I hed killed 'im. I run out ter whur he wuz a-layin', on'y ter find 'im on his feet quicker'n ye kin say 'scat!' an' with er pistol leveled at my head. He hed me whur I couldn't he'p myse'f, an' I hed ter do jes' ez he said."

The woman stamped her foot in anger and impatience.

"So you let him trick you!" she exclaimed. "And you

were so sure you would have no trouble in disposing of him."

"I didn't 'xpect ter hev enny trubble, mum; but ye see, I didn't know whut kin' uv er cuss ther feller wuz. He hain't no common scrub, he hain't. He's er way-up yander feller, an' a man takes his life in his hands when he goes arter that chap!"

"And you let 'im escape you?" There was sorrow and disappointment in the tone.

"I hed ter, mum. He hed me at his mercy, an' I couldn't do nothin' on'y jes' whut he tole me ter."

"And what did he tell you to do?"

Blodgett hesitated and fidgeted from one foot to the other.

"Oh, nothin' in purtickler," he mumbled.

But the woman seemed gifted with almost supernatural powers of perception.

"He made you tell why you had tried to kill him!" she exclaimed, with such positiveness that Joe could not make an attempt at denial.

"Waal, et wuz tell er git my brains blown out," the man growled; "an' I guess thar wuz on'y one thing ter do unner sech sarkumstances."

"What did you tell him?" This was in a tone of command, sharp, clear and decisive.

"I tole 'im—waal, all I knowned."

"Which was to the effect that——"

"Thet I wuz hired by er woman ter kill 'im."

"That is what you told him?"

"Yas, thet's whut I tole 'im."

"But of course you could not tell him who the woman was."

Blodgett shook his head. "No, I couldn't tell 'im thet; fur I didn't an' don' know."

"Did he ask you to try to guess who the woman might be?"

"Waal—yas, I b'leeve he did ax me sumthin' like thet."

"And did you try to make a guess regarding my identity?"

There was a threat in the woman's voice.

Blodgett shook his head.

"No, I didn't try ter make enny guess," he said; "I tolle 'im et would be onposserable ter guess at et; thet I hedn't enny idee whutever erbout who ye wuz."

"Humph! You are sure you are telling the truth?"

"So help me, I am!"

"And what did he do then?"

"Then he let me go."

"After you had tried to kill him, and he had you at his mercy?"

"Yas; he said ez how ef I'd promus never ter try ter harm 'im erg'in, he'd let me go free."

"And you promised?"

"Uv course I did. I didn't wanter git my head blowed off by refoosin'."

The woman was silent for a few moments, and then said: "Are you going to keep your promise?"

Blodgett looked nervous.

"Thet I won't try ter harm' im, ye mean?"

"Yes."

"Ye jes' bet I'm ergoin' ter keep et, mum! No more uv thet fur me."

"But you would succeed next time. If you will make another attempt I will give you five pounds of gold!"

The woman's voice was eager, almost entreating.

Blodgett shook his head decidedly.

"Not fur ten poun's, mum," he said. "Ter tell ye ther trooth, I wouldn't hev tried et erg'in ef ther cuss hedn't made me promus, fur et hain't down in ther books thet I'm ter kill him."

"What makes you think that?"

"W'y becos I hed ez party er chance ter take aim at 'im ez I ever hed at ennything in my life, an' I missed 'im slick an' clean. I never done sech er thing afore in all my life, an' I know frum thet thet et hain't intended that I'm ter kill 'im, an' I wouldn't try erg'in fur er hundred poun's."

"But that is folly," said the woman, evidently vexed. "You would not miss a second time. Try again."

"Not much I won't; no, siere!" and Joe shook his head decidedly.

The masked woman seemed to realize that Blodgett meant what he said, so did not again try to persuade him to make another attempt on the life of Dick Slater, but after a few moments of silence, she said:

"How am I to know that you made any attempt to kill him?"

"Wal," said Blodgett, "I guess ye'll hev ter take my word fur et, unless ye kin run ercross ther cuss 'imself, an' ax 'im. Ef ye c'u'd see his hat, ye'd know I've tole ye ther trooth, fur ye'd fin' er hole right through ther top uv et."

"I suppose you have told me the truth," said the masked woman, with a sigh. "Well, I must be going." Then she walked to the door, opened it, and pausing, looked back over her shoulder.

"Don't try to follow me," she said. "If you do, I will know it, for I am as good a woodsman as you are. Good night." Then the door closed, and she was gone.

A peculiar half smile appeared on the face of Joe Blodgett.

"Thar hain't no use fur me ter foller ye," he muttered; "fur I think I know who ye air, ennyhow."

CHAPTER IV.

MRS. HANNAH MUGGS.

When the Thompsons and Dick Slater had finished their supper Dick accompanied his host and the boy Tom out to where the carcass of the bear lay, and the three dragged it around back of the barn lot, and digging a hole in the ground buried what was left of Bruin.

This done, they started back to the house, but Mr. Thompson happened to think of something that had to be done at the stable, and stopped there, telling Dick and Tom not to wait for him.

They walked onward toward the house, and had gone only a few paces when there came the sharp, whip-like crack of a rifle, and a bullet whistled past Dick's head, so close, indeed, that he could feel the cold rush of the night air in the wake of the bullet.

"Somebody's shooting at us!" cried Tom.

"Whoever he is, he is in the edge of the timber yonder," cried Dick, and he bounded in that direction. As he ran, he leaped first one way, then the other, thus going in an erratic, zigzag fashion that would cause an enemy a great deal of trouble in trying to take aim, and it did not take so speedy a runner as Dick long to reach the timber. No second shot had been fired, which surprised the youth somewhat, but he determined to find the would-be assassin if such a thing were possible, and he darted in among the trees, and, pistol in hand, began a search for the skulker.

He looked long and carefully, but could find no sign of any one or anything to indicate that any one had been there. At last he gave up the search, and made his way back to where Tom stood. Mr. Thompson joined them just then, and was surprised when told of the attempt that had been made on Dick's life.

"That is the second attempt that has been made on my life within the past three hours," said Dick, and then he told of how some one had fired upon him from the roadside, though for some reason, scarcely clear to himself, he said nothing about the identity of the man who had made the attempt, or of the masked woman.

When they entered the house and told Mrs. Thompson and Nettie of what had just occurred the two were amazed.

"That is a very strange occurrence," said Mrs. Thompson.

"Yes, indeed!" coincided Nettie. "And you searched for the would-be assassin and failed to find any one?"

"Yes, I made a thorough search," said Dick. "The fellow, whoever he was, must have fired the shot, and then fled instantly."

Dick and the members of the Thompson family took seats in the big sitting room, and talked for perhaps half an hour, and then they were startled by a loud knocking on the door.

Mr. Thompson hastened to open the door, and all were surprised to see a woman standing there. The woman was dressed in black, and wore a poke-bonnet which so shaded her face as to make it practically invisible except when the light shone fair into the mouth of the bonnet. The glimpses which the spectators got of the woman's face were sufficient to show them that the owner was not by any means a beauty. The face was long, lean and angular, and the cheekbones were prominent, the nose long and hooked, the chin almost pointed; the eyes gleamed queerly.

"How d'y'e do?" greeted the newcomer. "Kin a pore, lone woman git ter stay here over night?"

"Most assuredly," replied Mr. Thompson. "Come in."

"But I've a horse out here. Whut'll I do with 'im?" the woman wished to know.

"I'll take care of the horse; come in."

The women obeyed, and ducking her head in such a way as to indicate all present, said: "How d'y'e do, folks. My name's Hanner Muggs, an' I live down ter Charleston. I've be'n up on ther Santee a-takin' keer uv my pore sick darter whut married a wuthless, no'-count 'xcuse uv er rebel man, an' I'm on my way back hum. I'm right glad ter know ye."

"My name is Thompson," replied the wife of the host, rising and offering the visitor a chair. "Take a seat, and take off your bonnet."

"Don't keer ef I do, Missus Thompson," was the reply, and the woman took off the bonnet and handed it to her hostess. Then she looked curiously around at Nettie, Tom and Dick.

"Be these all your children, Missus Thompson?" she asked.

"No; only these two," indicating Nettie and Tom. "This gentleman, Mr. Stone, is a traveler who is stopping over night with us."

The strange-looking woman bowed to Dick, and said: "I'm glad ter know ye, Mister Stone."

"The pleasure is mutual, I am sure," replied Dick, politely.

The youth was studying the woman's face closely and searchingly without seeming to do so. Somehow, he believed he had seen her before somewhere—though he could not think where. The voice, too, sounded familiar, but he could not remember who it was he had known as possessing such a voice.

Then a sudden, disconcerting thought struck the youth. Was this the masked woman, who had hired Blodgett to kill him? He began to suspect that such was the case. He could not think of any one who would be the woman in question, if this were not she. One thing was certain, the masked woman must have some very great grudge against him, to go to such lengths to have him put out of the way, and it was possible that this was the very woman, and that she was following him for vengeance.

This was not a pleasant thought, but Dick met the issue with perfect calmness and philosophy. He would take matters coolly, and try to get at the bottom of the mystery, if possible; at the same time he would be careful not to give the woman another chance at him, for if she was the mysterious enemy, then it was she who had fired at him from the edge of the timber, as he and Tom were coming to the house, after having buried the carcass of the bear.

Mr. Thompson returned presently, and told the woman that he had given her horse a place in the stable, and plenty of food.

"Oh, thank ye, sir; thank ye!" she said. "I'm much obleeged ter ye."

Then Mrs. Thompson asked her if she had had any supper, and on receiving the reply from Mrs. Muggs that she had as yet had no supper, the good woman went into the kitchen and placed food on the table, and invited the visitor to partake.

Mrs. Muggs was only too glad to do so, and ate like one who had been fasting for some time.

"I r'ally b'leeve I wuz hungry," she said naively, when she had finished.

Mrs. Thompson thought her guest was telling the truth when she made this statement.

They had not much more than gotten back into the sitting room before there came a knock on the door, and as soon as Mr. Thompson opened it a man rushed into the room. He was greatly excited, and was panting, as if he had run far and fast.

"Quick!" he gasped. "Leave the house and flee! The Whig Band is coming, and they threaten that they will burn a dozen Tory homes before morning! Flee, while you have time, for they may take it into their heads to kill some of our people!"

"Say you so, Jackson?" exclaimed Mr. Thompson, who seemed to be somewhat frightened.

"Yes, yes! And they are close at hand! You will have to hurry!"

Mrs. Thompson had uttered a cry of terror, when the man first entered, but Nettie and Tom had not said anything, though both looked somewhat pale. Hannah Muggs, the strange woman, looked eager and curious.

"Who and what are the members of this 'Whig Band,' as you call it?" asked Dick.

"They are our neighbors, who are rebels," explained Mr. Thompson. "They have threatened to do us damage at various times, but they never put their threats into effect, and we got so we paid no attention to them."

"But they mean to put their threats into execution tonight, neighbor Thompson!" declared the man addressed as Jackson; "and if you will take my advice you will flee to the woods, and stay there till they get through."

Whether or not the Thompsons would have done this will never be known, for at this moment a man stuck his head in through the open doorway, and said:

"Hello, there, Thompson! Just take your folks and clear out at once; we are going to burn your house down!"

"Hello, yourself, Morton," replied Thompson. "Surely you don't mean that!"

"Surely I do! You had better not lose any time, but get out as quick as possible. We are going to make a clean sweep of the house of every Tory in this neighborhood tonight, and we haven't any time to lose."

"But," protested Thompson, "why should you do that? We have never injured you folks in any way."

"No, I don't know that you have; but, my dear friends, the redcoats have burned the homes of several Whigs, and you sympathize with the redcoats, so are as bad as they, and would do the same if there were enough of you. Get out, and hurry about it."

"Oh, see here, Morton, you mustn't do that!" half entreated Thompson; "it isn't right. I can't think that you mean what you say."

"But I do! You must get out of here, and in a hurry, too. Some of the boys will set fire to the house in a minute, and the quicker you go the better it will be for you and your women folks."

"But look here, Morton, you have a family of your own, and surely you cannot have the heart to turn my family out of doors in such a fashion!"

"We have made up our minds," was the dogged reply; "you had better get out."

Dick, who had listened to the conversation with considerable interest, now thought it time to interfere. He

stepped up, and taking Morton by the arm, pulled him toward the doorway, saying, in a low voice:

"Come out of doors; I wish to have a talk with you."

"Who are you?" Morton asked, hanging back and evidently not relishing the interruption.

"Come outside and I will tell you."

There was a tone of command in the youth's voice, and Morton accompanied Dick out, and to a little distance where they halted.

"Now what do you want?" the man asked, somewhat arrogantly, for he was now surrounded by a dozen or more of his men.

"I want you to give up your idea of burning the houses," was the reply.

"You want us to give up the idea of burning the houses?" Morton exclaimed, impatiently and half angrily.

"Yes." Dick spoke calmly, but decidedly.

"Humph! Who are you that you should talk to us in that fashion?"

"Who am I?"

"Yes."

"I am, like yourselves, a patriot."

"Oh, you are?"

"Yes."

Then why object to the burning of the houses of the Tories?"

"For the reason that it is not brave or honorable to make war on women and children. If you wish to strike a blow at the British, I say for you to go ahead and do so, but this thing of burning homes and turning women and children out into the open air, without roofs to shelter them, is very poor business and I don't think you are the men to do it. I should be sorry if I should be forced to witness such an act by men who are adherents of the great cause of Liberty."

"Who are you, anyway?" asked Morton.

"Yes, yes; who are you?" cried several of the men.

"I will tell you if you will promise not to tell any one," said Dick.

"We promise, we promise!" was the cry.

Dick glanced toward the house, and then seeing that Mr. Thompson and his wife and the strange woman, Hannah Muggs, were standing in the doorway, he lowered his voice and whispered his name in Morton's ear.

The man had heard of Dick Slater, and quickly made his way about among the men, of whom there were nearly a score, and told them who Dick was. They seemed greatly impressed, and while some had been murmuring at first when the youth was talking to Morton, they now were silent and had nothing to say. They looked at one another

blankly, however; doubtless they felt somewhat ashamed that they should have been caught at such work as they had intended doing.

Dick now led the way out to the road and held a long conversation with the men. He argued with them and soon succeeded in convincing them that they would be doing wrong in burning the homes of the Tories.

"If only the men would be affected, it would not be so bad," said Dick; "but you see how it is—the woman and children would be made homeless and that would be terrible."

"Some of the women are as rabid Tories as their husbands, though," said one of the men.

"Of course; and it is their right to be," said Dick. "They are non-combatants, and their ideas don't count. They would be very much lacking if they did not think as their husbands think—that is, up to a certain point. It is only natural that they should do so. Your wives think as you do about this matter, do they not?"

"Yes, they do," the men acknowledged.

"And you would be angry if the Tories were to persecute or injure your wives and children for thinking as you do, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, we would," was the reply.

"Exactly; then you must not burn the homes of your Tory neighbors."

"We won't!" was the unanimous cry. "We won't do it, now!"

This matter being settled, Dick proceeded to tell the men why he was in that part of the country, and asked them if they could give him any information regarding the whereabouts of General Marion. The men said that they could not tell him just where to look for the "Swamp Fox," but all were unanimous in saying that they thought Dick would find him as quickly by remaining in this neighborhood as by going farther on in the direction of Charleston.

"The 'Swamp Fox' has struck several blows in this vicinity," said Mr. Morton; "and has killed and captured nearly all the members of half a dozen different parties of redcoats during the last month or so. He is hiding in the swamps in this vicinity, but doesn't stay long in one place."

Dick secured all the information possible and told the men that he would make his headquarters in this settlement and make incursions into the swamps of the vicinity in search of General Marion.

"That'll be as good a plan as any," said Mr. Morton; "but you won't want to stay here at Joe Thompson's, for he's a rank Tory; you'd better come home with me."

"Thank you for your kindness," said Dick; "and I will take up my quarters in your house to-morrow. I will stay here over night, for if I were to go away they would feel hurt and might, moreover, suspect that I was a patriot spy and send word to the British at Charleston."

"Won't they suspect, anyway?" asked Mr. Morton. "They will wonder how it happened that you were able to persuade us out of the notion of burning the houses."

"I'll explain that," said Dick; "I will tell them that I argued with you and convinced you that you were not doing right in wishing to burn the homes of the Tories."

After a little further talk the men took their departure and Dick went back to the house and entered it.

"Have they gone?" asked Mr. Thompson.

"Yes," replied Dick; "I argued the case with them and they finally came to the conclusion that they wouldn't be doing right in burning the houses of their neighbors and they have gone back to their own homes."

"Oh, thank goodness for that!" exclaimed Mrs. Thompson, with a sigh of relief; "just think how terrible it would have been had they burned our home!"

"Again you have placed us under obligations to you, Mr. Stone," said Mr. Thompson; "first, you saved Nettie's life, and now you have saved our home. I don't know how we shall ever be able to cancel our indebtedness to you."

"Just consider it canceled now," said Dick, with a smile; "I want no pay for what I have done; I am happy in having been able to do those things and that is pay enough."

They conversed for nearly an hour longer, and Dick took notice that the strange woman, Hannah Muggs, watched him closely, while pretending not to pay much attention to what was going on.

The youth tried, again and again, to recall where he had seen the woman, but could not; and at last dismissed the matter from his mind. "Perhaps I am mistaken," he thought; "it may be that I have seen some one who looked something like her, but I hardly think I have ever seen her before."

Finally he said he would go to bed, and Mr. Thompson lighted a candle and went with the youth and showed him upstairs and into a good-sized, cozy-looking bedroom.

"I guess you will be comfortable here," said Mr. Thompson as he set the candle on a stand and turned to leave the room; "good-night."

"Good-night," replied Dick; "yes, this will be solid comfort."

He was soon in bed and was just dozing off to sleep when he heard the trampling of feet in the hall and then

a door opened just across the hall from his room. He heard the high-pitched, querulous voice of Hannah Muggs, and understood the matter. She was going to bed and had the room across the hall. This turned the youth's thoughts to the strange woman, and while thinking of her, and wondering whether or not she was the masked woman who had hired Blodgett to try to kill him, he fell asleep.

How long he slept he had no means of knowing, but it must have been away past midnight when he was awakened by some noise, and after listening a few moments he realized that there was some one in his room!

CHAPTER V.

IN THE SWAMPS.

It was dark in the room, of course, Dick having extinguished the light on going to bed, and he could not see anything. He had to trust entirely to his hearing. After listening intently for a few moments he came to the conclusion that there was only one intruder.

Who could it be? Dick asked himself this question, but, of course, could not answer it.

The person, whoever it was, approached the bed and the youth was sure that the intruder was feeling in the pockets of his clothing.

Dick did not fancy this, and made up his mind to put a stop to it.

"Who is there?" he asked, in a quiet, but grim voice.

Instantly there was a rush of feet and the intruder was out of the room and the door pulled shut. Dick leaped out of bed, ran to the door, opened it and looked out, but could see or hear nothing. All was still, just as if every soul in the house was plunged in slumber.

"That's queer," thought the youth; "where did the rascal go, I wonder?"

As he was unable to answer the question, Dick went to work and did the next best thing—fastened the door as securely as possible, so as to keep any one else from entering, or the same person from entering again.

Then he lay down once more, thought over the strange circumstances a few moments and was asleep.

Dick said nothing to any one next morning, regarding his having been disturbed during the night. He thought it would worry Mr. and Mrs. Thompson for no purpose.

After breakfast he bade all good-by, and, mounting his horse, rode away toward the south. He had asked the

way and distance to Mr. Morton's house, of that gentleman himself, the night before, and did not anticipate having any trouble in finding his way.

The youth was scarcely more than around the first bend in the road, a distance of a quarter of a mile from the house, before the woman traveler, Hannah Muggs, declared that she must go. Mr. Thompson got her horse out of the stable and the strange woman mounted and rode away, going in the same direction Dick had gone.

It was only about a mile and a half to the home of Mr. Morton, and the youth soon reached there. Mr. Morton was out in the yard and saw and recognized the newcomer, and greeted him pleasantly.

"Good morning; glad to see you, Mr. Slater!" he greeted. "Been to breakfast? If not, jump off and go in the house and my wife will give you something to eat. I'll look after the horse."

"I've been to breakfast, thanks," said Dick. "I'll go with you to the stable."

Mr. Morton led the way, and when they reached the stable Dick alighted and led the horse inside and to a vacant stall. Some hay was placed in the manger by the man, while Dick unbridled and unsaddled the horse, and then both emerged and went to the house, where Dick was introduced to the different members of the family, consisting of Mrs. Morton, two daughters, sixteen and eighteen years of age, and named Daisy and Agnes respectively, and Sam, a boy of ten years. Of course, here, Dick was introduced under his own name, as it was known who he was.

The girls were both pretty and were bright and lively, and it would have been evident to any one who was anything of an observer that they were very favorably impressed with Dick's appearance.

"Oh, Mr. Slater, Father has told us all about how you talked him and the rest of the men out of the notion of burning the Tory homes!" exclaimed Agnes. "We think it was just splendid of you, and we were so glad you did so; for we didn't want father to go, in the first place, did we, mother?"

"No, indeed," was the reply; "and I for one thank Mr. Slater for having persuaded them to not do it."

"And so am I, now!" declared Mr. Morton. "I know, now, that I should have felt very small and mean if we had gone ahead and burned the homes of the Tories, as we started out to do."

"I'm glad I was on hand to enter a protest," said Dick; "I have seen a great deal of such work, and must acknowledge that the Tories are much worse for it than the Whigs, but that is no reason why the Whigs should do such things. Two wrongs do not make one right."

"True," agreed Mrs. Morton; "and it is the women and children who suffer the most."

"Oh, it was just grand of you to persuade them not to do it, Mr. Slater!" said Daisy, who was inclined to gush a bit, on occasion.

Dick changed the conversation, as he was a modest fellow, and was never very much pleased by hearing himself praised. After remaining in the house for perhaps an hour—until he had become quite well acquainted with the different members of the household, indeed, he said that he must get to work.

"I must find General Marion," he declared, "and so I will set out in search of him at once."

"I wish that I had nothing that required attention so that I could go along with you," said Mr. Morton; "but there is work in the field for both Sam and myself, and it must be attended to. I can, however, tell you in which direction the swamps lie, and you will not have much trouble in finding them. The only difficulty is that you are apt to become lost, as they are regular labyrinths, and one who is not used to their ins and outs is liable to find that he can get in, but can't get out again."

Dick noticed a peculiar, eager look on the face of each of the girls. "Oh, father, let Agie and I go with Mr. Slater!" cried Daisy, her eyes shining. "We know every crook and turn of the swamps, and know every entrance and where the solid ground is and everything. We can guide Mr. Slater. Please let us go!"

"Yes, yes; do, father!" exclaimed Agie.

"No, no!" cried Dick; "I wouldn't think of putting your daughters to such trouble. I will be able to get along very nicely, I am sure."

But Mrs. Morton seemed to favor letting the girls go. "You do not know our swamps, Mr. Slater," she said; "they are something terrible, and you being from the North can have no idea regarding them. If you were to become lost in one of them you would starve to death. The girls know every crook and turn in all the swamps of the neighborhood, and will be excellent guides. Father and I shall be glad to have them go with you, and you will do well to accept of their company and guidance."

"Yes, they had better go with Mr. Slater," agreed Mr. Morton; "otherwise he would be almost certain to get lost."

"Oh, goody!" cried Daisy. "We're going! We're going!"

The girls seemed so delighted by the thought of accompanying him that Dick decided that it would be discourteous to refuse to let them go. Then, too, he realized that they would be of great benefit to him, as they knew the swamps well, while he did not.

The girls hastened to get ready, and appeared a few minutes later dressed for the trip through the timber and swamps. They started out at once, Dick being eager to get to work.

Mrs. Morton had made up three packages of food, as it would likely be inconvenient for them to return for dinner, and thus equipped they set out, disappearing in the timber which lay to the west of the house.

The girls walked briskly. Doubtless they wished Dick to know that they were not to be a clog to him in getting along at good speed.

"Don't exert yourselves too greatly, girls," said Dick. "Go at an easy pace, and don't hurry."

"Oh, we can walk as fast, and as far, as any man!" replied Agnes. "We can go as fast as you wish to go, and keep it up all day."

"I am glad to know that," said Dick. "Still there is no need of going at a pace that will tire you out."

They walked onward for perhaps a mile, and then they came to a swamp.

"Now, if we were not with you," said Daisy, "you would not know how to enter this swamp at all, but would probably get mired in the mud. With us along it will be different, for we know the entrance and all the paths, and the location of all the islands, and just how to reach them."

"Yes, indeed," coincided Agnes. "We have been all through these swamps many times."

"I am glad you girls are along," said Dick. "I begin to realize now that I would have had great difficulty in making my way through these swamps."

"Oh, you could not have done it at all," declared Daisy. "But with us to show you the way you will have no difficulty."

"This way," said Agnes. "The entrance is up here a little ways."

At this instant there came the sharp report of a rifle, and a bullet whistled within an inch of Dick's nose.

A scream escaped the girls.

"Who fired that shot?" cried Agnes.

"And why?" from Daisy.

"I don't know, but I'll try to find out," said Dick, and he bounded away in the direction from which the shot had sounded.

"That bullet must have been intended for Dick, don't you think, Agnes?" asked Daisy.

"Of course; nobody would shoot at us."

"Goodness! What if the bullet had hit him!"

"In that case he would have been killed or wounded," replied the more practical Agnes.

"Oh, that would have been terrible! He is so handsome and noble!"

"I do believe you're in love with him, Daisy Morton!" cried Agnes, a tinge of jealousy in her tones.

"No, I'm not in love with him," denied Daisy; "but I—I—like him. I guess you love him yourself."

"No," replied Agnes mockingly, "I—I—just like him, the same as you do."

The girls eyed each other suspiciously and somewhat angrily. It was evident that Dick stood high in the esteem of both.

Meanwhile the youth was making the best possible speed through the timber in the direction from which the shot had sounded.

He kept a sharp lookout as he ran, but failed to see any one, or anything to indicate the presence of any one in the vicinity. He could not even see or smell the smoke of the firearm. It was as quiet as if no one save himself had ever set foot in the timber.

Dick ran onward, however, and kept a sharp lookout. He thought that he would surely be able to discover some sign of his unseen enemy.

He was soon out of sight of the girls, and suddenly an exclamation escaped him:

"Yonder he is—no, by Jove, it's a woman!"

Nearly a hundred yards ahead, running at a swift pace, was a woman, and Dick could just make out that there was a white cloth thing pulled down over the head of the fugitive.

"It is the mysterious masked woman who hired Joe Blodgett to try to kill me," thought Dick. "I must catch her, if possible. I have a great curiosity to see who she is, and I would like to learn why she wishes my death."

Dick raced onward at the best speed of which he was capable, but, to his surprise, found that he was not gaining fast, if, indeed, he was gaining at all.

"Whoever she is, she can run!" he thought; "but I won't be beaten by a woman! I'll overtake her, or know the reason why!"

He ran his very best, and seemed to be gaining somewhat, but when he had lessened the distance between them to about seventy-five yards he suddenly lost sight of the fugitive. He ran onward, however, thinking he would come in sight of her again soon.

In this he was disappointed, and when he reached the spot where she had been when she disappeared Dick stopped and looked around him.

It was no use. The woman was nowhere to be seen. She had disappeared as mysteriously as if the earth had opened

and swallowed her. Dick was nonplussed and somewhat vexed.

"Well, this beats anything I have ever run up against!" he murmured. "This mysterious woman is getting me more and more mixed all the time. She seems to be able to disappear at will. I'll make a thorough search for her, though, and maybe I'll find her after all."

But he didn't. He looked everywhere, and even ran onward another hundred yards, and still he saw nothing of the fugitive. He finally gave it up, and made his way back toward the spot where he had left the girls.

"Did you see who it was that shot at you?" asked Daisy eagerly.

"Yes, I saw her," replied Dick.

"Saw 'her'?" exclaimed both girls in unison.

"Yes."

"You don't mean to say that it was a woman who shot at you!" almost gasped Agnes.

"Yes, it was a woman."

"Was she young or old?" asked Daisy eagerly.

"I couldn't tell. I wasn't close enough, and then, too, she had her face hidden by a mask."

"Her face hidden by a mask?"

The exclamation burst from the girls in unison, and they stared at Dick in open-mouthed amazement.

The youth could not help smiling. "Yes, her face was hidden by a mask," he replied; "so I could not tell whether she was old or young."

"And you couldn't catch her?" from Agnes.

"No. I tried my best, and was gaining on her, when suddenly she disappeared, and although I looked high and low for her I could not again get sight of her."

"How strange!" murmured Daisy. "I never heard of such a thing in my life."

"Nor I," from Agnes. "My! how I would like to know who the woman is!"

"And so should I," said Dick. "I would like to know who she is, and why she wishes my death. This is the third time an attempt has been made on my life since I reached this neighborhood, and it is becoming rather trying on my nerves."

"The third time?" exclaimed Daisy, interrogatively.

"Yes." And then Dick told of his encounter with Joe Blodgett, and all about the masked woman, and how he had been shot at while out near the barn lot at Mr. Thompson's. He also told regarding the strange woman, Hannah Muggs, and gave it as his suspicion that she was the masked woman.

The girls looked at each other, and Dick saw from the expression on their faces that they had their doubts re-

garding this, and also that they had a suspicion regarding the identity of the masked woman.

"What do you think about it?" he asked. "Have you any suspicion regarding the identity of the masked woman?"

"Oh, we'd rather not say anything, one way or the other, just now," said Agnes hastily. It was evident that she was afraid Daisy would speak out, and tell who they suspected.

"Oh, very well," said Dick. "I don't want you to do so, unless you really wish to."

"But what harm can it do, Aggie?" asked Daisy, who evidently wished to tell whom they suspected.

"We may be wrong, Daisy," her sister replied; "and it would be bad if we were to direct suspicion where it does not belong."

"True," agreed Dick. "Don't say a word, if you don't wish to."

Daisy was dissatisfied, but as Dick himself had said that it would be best for them to say nothing, at present, she accepted the situation, though it was evidently hard for her to do so.

"Lead the way into the swamp, girls," said Dick. "We have lost considerable time already."

The girls at once moved forward, and at a point a hundred yards away turned aside and entered the swamp. Dick followed, and was surprised to find that they were following a narrow path which was of solid earth, though on both sides lay mud and slime, from which a morass of tall, wild grass and scraggy bushes of various kinds grew up in great profusion.

Dick realized that he would have had a hard time of it had he tried to find his way through the swamps without a guide.

"I am beginning to be very glad, indeed, that you girls are with me," he said. "I would undoubtedly have gotten lost, or mired in the mud, otherwise."

"Oh, you could never have found your way unaided," said Agnes.

"No, indeed!" from Daisy.

The girls were pleased to know that Dick was glad they were along, and they vied with each other in showing their escort how well they knew the paths leading in and out and through the swamps. They kept on making their way along until noon, and had not seen a sign of a human being other than themselves, although they had walked several miles.

They paused on an island and ate lunch, and after resting an hour started again. They kept going for a couple of hours, and then Dick said:

"Hadn't we better turn back? We must be a long way from your home?"

"Yes, we are quite a ways from home," replied Agnes; "but we don't need to turn back, as we can take a round-about course, and finally get back, after having described almost a circle."

"That will be all right, then, and will be better than going back over the same ground we have already traversed."

"Oh, yes, much better," said Daisy. "We may succeed in finding General Marion somewhere before we get back."

The girls took a circuitous route now, and Dick could not help marveling at their perfect knowledge of the paths. He decided that such knowledge could only have been acquired by years of familiarity, and he asked how it happened that the girls were so well posted with the ins and outs of the swamps.

"We have lived here all our lives," was Daisy's reply; "and often some of the stock breaks out, and strays away. Naturally they make for the swamps, and we girls have always been in the habit of helping father to hunt for them. That is how we have come to know the paths so well."

Onward they went for several hours, and at last the sun got so low that it was hidden behind the tops of the trees, and the shades of evening began to descend.

"How much farther is it to your home?" asked Dick.

"About five miles," was the reply.

"That is quite a ways; can we reach there before night-fall?"

"Oh, yes, I think so," replied Agnes.

"Aren't you girls tired?"

"Oh, not so very," was the reply. "We are used to this, you know. I judge that you are more tired than we are."

"I am not so very tired," Dick said. "I am an old campaigner, you know, used to marching and exposure, and do not tire very easily."

They continued onward for more than an hour, and then suddenly Daisy exclaimed:

"I smell smoke!"

"So do I!" from Agnes.

Dick detected the odor also, and called a halt.

"It may be possible that we are about to find the man I am looking for," he said; "and that at last we have found the 'Swamp Fox,' but we can't be sure of it, and had best be careful. You girls remain here while I go forward on a scouting expedition."

"Very well," said Agnes. "There is an island about ten acres just ahead, and doubtless there is where you will

find the encampment. Go straight ahead, following the path."

"Very well; I'll be right back."

Dick stole forward, and quickly disappeared from the girls' view.

He was gone perhaps twenty minutes, and then, just as the girls were about to become nervous, he returned.

"Did you see who it is that is encamped on the island, Dick?" asked Agnes.

Dick nodded, a grave look on his face.

"Yes," he said, "I saw who it is."

"Who is it?" asked Daisy. "Isn't it General Marion and his band?"

"No," he said soberly. "It is a band of redcoats."

CHAPTER VI.

DICK FINDS MARION.

The girls turned pale.

"A band of redcoats!" they exclaimed in unison.

"Yes."

"And they are encamped on the island?"

"Yes."

"Goodness! What shall we do?"

Dick shook his head. "I hardly know," he said. "We will have to remain here till after dark, and then try to slip past them and reach the main land."

"How many redcoats are there?" asked Daisy.

"There must be at least fifty of them."

"Where are they encamped?" asked Agnes. "On what part of the island, I mean."

"At about the centre, I should judge."

"Then we may be able to slip past them in the darkness and reach the path; it starts from the right hand farther corner of the island."

"I think we shall be able to do so; but it will be unpleasant waiting here."

"Oh, we can stand it, I guess."

They went back about fifty yards to a point where the path widened out to a width of ten or twelve feet, and here they sat down and took it as easy as possible. They had some of the lunch left and ate it, after which they felt better. Indeed, the girls seemed quite cheerful, and Dick was glad of this, for he had feared they might be frightened and nervous.

Gradually it grew dark and darker, and after an hour had passed it was dark enough so that Dick thought it

safe to make the attempt to get past the redcoat encampment. He gave the word and they stole forward.

They soon reached the island and made their way toward the right, keeping as close to the swamp as was possible, as in doing so they were keeping as far away from the British encampment as possible.

They were soon where they could see the redcoats, who were seated about the fires, talking and laughing, and evidently quite unsuspecting that any one was near. There were no pickets out and this made it comparatively an easy task to get past without attracting attention.

When they reached the path leading from the island to the mainland, and Dick felt that they were safe, he told the girls to wait a little while.

"I wish to go back and see if I can overhear anything that is said," he explained; "they might talk about something that it would be important that General Marion should know."

"Go on," urged the girls; "we will be all right, here, and you may take all the time you like."

The youth hastened away from the spot and made his way toward the encampment. He had taken a good look at the surroundings before, and he knew just where he wished to take up his position. This was behind a tree which stood not twenty yards from where the redcoats sat, and he succeeded in reaching it without attracting the attention of the soldiers.

When Dick got himself fixed comfortably and ventured to peer around the tree-trunk, he was treated to a surprise. Seated by the fire on the opposite side, with her face toward the tree, was the woman Dick had seen at the Thompson home—Hannah Muggs!

"Well, well! this is a surprise!" thought the youth. "What is that woman doing here?" Then a sudden thought came to him, and he went on: "I will wager that she isn't a woman at all, but a man dressed in woman's clothing, and that she—or he, rather—is a British spy! And I will wager, also, that he is the supposed woman who hired Joe Blodgett to try to kill me and who fired the two shots at me."

This was quite a reasonable supposition, and after listening to the talk for a few minutes Dick became assured of the fact that the supposed woman was indeed a man in disguise.

"Doubtless he is a noted British spy," thought the youth; "and he has, in some way, learned who I am and thought to acquire fame and glory by having me killed, or by killing me himself. I shall have to watch the fellow!"

Dick decided that he would do more than watch him. "He has been striking at me secretly, and I owe him

something," the youth said to himself, compressing his lips; "and as I make it a rule to always pay my debts, I shall endeavor to do so in this instance."

Dick was disappointed, however, in not hearing anything which conveyed any information of value. The men's conversation was on topics of no interest to the listener. Feeling that nothing was to be gained by remaining, Dick finally left his position and made his way back to where the girls were awaiting his coming.

"We expected to hear pistol shots every moment!" Daisy said. "We were so afraid they might discover you were there, and attack you."

"I was very careful," said Dick, "for I did not wish to get you girls into trouble. If I had only myself to think of it would not have made much difference if they had discovered my presence, as I could have escaped."

"How good of you to think of us!" said Daisy.

"Oh, but think how good it has been of you two girls to do what you have done for me!" said Dick. "I am greatly in your debt."

"Oh, no; it has been a pleasure!" declared Agnes, not to be outdone by her sister. "We are glad that we have been able to render you assistance, but are sorry you have been unable to find General Marion."

They had been making their way along the path while talking, and had just reached the mainland as Agnes finished speaking, and all three were startled to hear a voice exclaim:

"Who wishes to find General Marion?"

The girls uttered little cries of dismay and terror, and crowded close up to Dick for protection. The youth, however, gave utterance to an exclamation of pleasure. He was sure that he recognized the voice as being that of General Marion. Dick had been in the South before, and had met the "Swamp Fox," and was sure that he was not mistaken—so sure of it that he said, aloud:

"It is I, Dick Slater. Is that you, General Marion?"

"Yes, yes!" was the reply. "Can it be possible that it is you, Dick? Come out here and let me see you!"

The three emerged from among the high grass and bushes of the swamp, into the comparatively open forest, and saw that they were in the midst of a band of men who stood about like so many shadowy ghosts. Right in front of them was a rather under-sized man, and Dick recognized him at once as being Marion.

The youth leaped forward and seized the hand of the "Swamp Fox." "I'm so glad I've found you!" he exclaimed. "I have been searching for you in the swamps the whole day."

"Well, well; I am, indeed, glad to see you, Dick!" the

"Swamp Fox" cried. "But why are you away down here in South Carolina, so far away from General Washington?"

"I have been up in North Carolina and Virginia," replied Dick, "and General Greene sent me down here to find you and deliver a message to you."

"Good! Well, you have found me, my boy."

"So I have, and will deliver the message."

Dick drew a folded paper from a secret pocket in his coat and handed it to the "Swamp Fox."

"Strike a light, one of you," the general ordered, addressing his men. "I will read this at once."

"Wait just a moment," said Dick; "don't strike a light just yet."

"Why not?" in surprise.

"For the reason that by doing so you will lose the opportunity of striking the British a blow."

"How is that?"

"I will tell you: Out in the swamp, there, only half a mile from here, about fifty redcoats are encamped. By keeping them in ignorance of your presence you can slip out there and catch them napping and kill or capture all of them."

"Just the thing!" exclaimed Marion. "Jove! such a chance must not be missed. I will attend to that matter first, and then read General Greene's message afterward."

"Yes, it will wait, while the other matter might not," said Dick.

"True; well, get ready, men. We will go and attend to the ease of the redcoats at once. But who are the young ladies, Dick?"

"The daughters of a patriot who lives near here. They know all the ins and outs of the swamps, and were so kind as to go with me and act as my guides."

"Ah, they are indeed noble-hearted girls! I salute you, young ladies!" and the general saluted. Then he advanced and shook their hands and called them by name, Dick having told him what their names were.

The girls were delighted by being treated so courteously by the "Swamp Fox," of whom they had heard their father speak in such terms of praise.

"But what will you girls do while we are gone?" asked Dick. "I hate to go away and leave you here alone."

"Oh, that is all right," said Agnes; "it is only a mile to our home, and we can find the way without trouble; indeed, we have gone much farther than that after night, without escorts."

"Very well; under the circumstances I shall agree to let you go, but if it were not necessary for me to go with General Marion, I would not consent to you going home alone. Good-by, till I see you again."

"Good-by!" said the girls, in unison.

Then the "Swamp Fox" bade them good-by, and as soon as the girls had gone the party of grim, determined men entered the swamp and made its way along the winding path. Dick was in the lead, with Marion close behind.

"You say there are about fifty of them, Dick?" the "Swamp Fox" asked.

"Yes; as near as I could count them."

"And I have eighty men. We will surround them and call upon them to surrender; if they do so, well and good, but if they do not, and try to show fight or get away, we will shoot them down without mercy, for the only way to discourage the enemy is by hurting them, and as many of them as possible, just as much as is possible."

This is the doctrine of war, and while it seems cruel, it is the only thing to do. If you don't kill them they will kill you.

Onward the men stole, as noiselessly, almost, as so many shadows. Marion's men were hardy and were expert woodsmen, as skilled, almost, as were the red Indians of the forest, and could move along without making any more noise than the redmen would have made.

It did not take long for them to reach the island, and the camp-fire of the enemy was plainly visible, as were the men sitting about it. The "Swamp Fox" gave his orders. The men were to spread out and gradually surround the redcoats.

This they proceeded to do, and so carefully did they execute the manœuvre that the men who were sitting there, talking, laughing and telling stories, never suspected that an enemy was within a mile of them.

They were destined to be rudely awakened to a knowledge of their danger. When the work of surrounding them had been completed, Marion suddenly leaped forward from behind the tree behind which Dick had been stationed earlier in the evening, and, confronting the almost paralyzed redcoats, cried:

"Surrender in the name of Liberty and the Continental Congress!"

The redcoats leaped to their feet with cries of alarm and rage.

Some of them made motions to secure their muskets, and the "Swamp Fox" warned them not to do so.

"If you touch a weapon, you die!" he cried. "You are surrounded, and you will only bring about your own deaths if you attempt to resist. Surrender or die!"

The "Swamp Fox's" men now advanced, so the enemy could see them, and the redcoats stood hesitating.

Suddenly the commander of the British called out:

"Don't surrender, men! They do not outnumber us. Seize your weapons and fight to the death!"

As he gave the command, he drew and waved his sword.

"You are a fool!" cried Marion. "It will be death for your men! Haven't you any sense at all?"

The redcoats were still hesitating. They had no stomach for resisting, even though their commander had ordered them to do so, and in this they were wise. It angered the officer, however, and he again ordered them to seize their weapons and resist.

"Hold, men!" cried Marion, authoritatively. "Don't steal your fates by attempting resistance. Your commander is a fool, and if he wishes to sacrifice his life, let him do so, but don't you sacrifice yours!"

"By the heavens above, I will run you through, if it is the last act of my life!" the officer cried, and he rushed at the "Swamp Fox" like a madman.

Marion was as brave a man as ever lived, and as cool a one, and as ready at any and all times for a fight as the next man, and his sword was out of the scabbard like a flash.

"Don't fire on him, men!" he cried. "Make prisoners of the others, and I will attend to this fierce gamecock!"

The next instant the swords clashed together, and sparks flew in every direction. It was a fierce fight. Marion was slightly lame, but it did not seem to interfere with his movements in any way. He got around more nimbly than his opponent, who was a larger and clumsier man.

Clash, clash! went the weapons, and for a while it was hard to say which was getting the better of the combat; indeed, it seemed as if they were about evenly matched. Both sets of men—Marion's and the redcoats—watched the combat with breathless eagerness. The latter thought their commander would prove the victor, for he was one of the crack soldiers of the regiment to which they belonged. Marion's men, however, were, on the other hand, just as confident that their commander would win, for they knew his powers. It was not the first time he had crossed swords in individual combat with soldiers of the king's army.

"Aha!" suddenly exclaimed the British officer, making a fierce lunge, "I came within an ace of spitting you then, you ragged rebel!"

"But a miss is as good as a mile, you know," was the calm retort.

"Yes, but I'll get you next ti—ten thousand curses on you! You have marked me for life!" and then a string of curses escaped the lips of the enraged Briton. He had been caught off his guard by Marion, and the patriot's sword had made an ugly gash in the braggart's face. The

blood was streaming from the wound, and the redcoat was almost blind with rage.

"Don't let your angry passions rise," was the calm, cold-toned advice of the imperturbable "Swamp Fox." "If you do, I shall improve the opportunity and run you through."

"Do it, if you can, you cursed rebel!" almost shouted the officer. "If you don't kill me, I will kill you, for this is to the death. I would scorn to accept life at your hands, and shall not spare yours under any circumstances. It is to the death, I tell you!"

"As you will," was the calm reply. "It is to your death, then, for I have no intention of dying just yet. I have too much work to do for the great cause of Liberty—have too many minions of a tyrant king to dispose of."

"Oh, you iron-faced braggart, I'll kill you! I'll spit you as I would a frog!" howled the officer, now beside himself with rage, and he began a furious onslaught which would have beaten many a man down. Not so Marion, however; he was a skilled swordsman, and was quick, active, keen-eyed, and very strong as well, and was enabled to easily hold his own till the fury of the other's assault spent itself. Then he took the offensive, and began forcing matters. It did not take the officer long to realize that he had met his master, and his face was seen to pale under the light of the camp-fire. He fought on desperately, however, and putting all his strength in a last effort, he made wild lunges at his nimble antagonist, exclaiming with each effort, "Die, dog!"

But the "dog" was not yet ready to die, and when the other was making one of his lunges, and exclaiming, "Die, dog!" something suddenly happened. Marion quickly beat the other's sword down, there was a flashing of steel, a swishing sound, and the British officer's head flew off his shoulders, cut off slick and clean by one lightning-like stroke from the weapon of the "Swamp Fox."

"For the good of the cause!" said Marion calmly and coldly, as he turned toward the group of redcoats. "Your commander was a fool, men," he went on, "and would have rushed you on to your doom, so I killed him to save the shedding of more and better blood. Surrender!"

"We surrender!" one of the redcoats cried, and a wild cheer went up from Marion's men in celebration of the surrender of the enemy, and of their commander's victory over the British officer as well.

The redcoats' arms were strapped behind their backs with their own belts, after they had been disarmed, and then they were told to sit down. They did so, and then Marion ordered his men to bury the dead officer, which they quickly did.

Meanwhile the "Swamp Fox" had opened the letter

from General Greene, and read it by the light of the camp fire. When he had done so he called Dick, and took him to one side out of earshot of those around the fire.

"You were not aware of the contents of the letter which you brought, Dick?" he asked.

"No."

"Then I will tell you. General Greene says he is going to send five hundred men down here to co-operate with me, and with General Sumpter, as well, and assist in holding the British in check here in the vicinity of Charleston. You know, they have been carrying things with rather a high hand around here."

"Yes; so I have heard."

"Yes, they have; but when the five hundred men reach here we will make them change their tactics."

"Did General Greene say how soon he would send the men?"

"Yes; he said he would send them at once."

"Then they are doubtless on their way down here now."

"Yes; I haven't any doubt regarding that."

"Jove! I wish he would send my 'Liberty Boys' along! Somehow, I like it here, and would like to stay a while, and help you thrash the redcoats."

"Perhaps he has done so."

"I've a good mind to wait till they get here, and see," said Dick reflectively.

"Do so; you won't have to wait long."

"I believe I will."

"I shall send out scouts at once," said Marion, "with instructions to keep a sharp lookout for the men Greene is sending, and then as soon as they reach this part of the country they will be guided right to me."

"Where do you stay?"

"On another island about two miles from here. It is larger than this one, and much harder to reach. There is but one path to be traversed in reaching it, and it is not connected with other swamps by path, as is this one. I have several cabins built there, and we live fairly comfortable. It is absolutely safe, as we could hold it against an army, and that is the main thing."

"True. And will you take the prisoners there?"

"Yes, at once."

The two started to return to the fire, and as they walked along Marion said: "Of course you will take up your quarters with me, over on the island?"

"No," Dick astonished him by replying, "I am staying at a farmhouse—the home of those two girls who were with me when we found you, you remember—and I think I will remain there until the men get here."

Marion slapped Dick on the shoulder. "That's all right,

my boy," he said laughing. "They were pretty girlis, sure enough, and I don't blame you for wishing to stay there."

"But that isn't it," Dick hastened to say. "I have another reason, and a powerful one. I have some work to do, a mystery to solve, and if I were to remain with you I would not have the opportunity to do this work, or solve the mystery."

Marion paused. "Tell me about," he said.

Thinking that the "Swamp Fox" might be able to give him some hint that would be of benefit to him in unravelling the mystery of his mysterious enemy, the youth decided to tell him all, and he at once did so.

Marion stood and pondered for a few moments, after Dick had finished. "It is a very strange affair," he said presently. "I really would not like to say whom I suspect to be the masked woman, for fear I might wrong some one—indeed, to tell the truth, I am not at all sure that I suspect one more than another. It might be this girl Nettie, or it might be the woman, Hannah Muggs, though you say she is not a woman at all, but a British spy dressed in woman's clothing."

"And that reminds me," exclaimed Dick suddenly, "that that spy was here among the redcoats an hour ago, but I don't see him anywhere now! He must have escaped."

"He probably left before we got here, and after you were here the first time. He could not have gone after we surrounded them."

"I know he could not have done so."

Then Marion told Dick to return to the home of the Mortons and keep a sharp lookout for the mysterious masked woman. "Depend upon it, she will make still other attempts on your life," he said. "Be on your guard, or she may succeed in her attempts."

When they returned to the camp-fire Marion at once gave the command to move, and the patriots took the prisoners in hand and forced them to march out and away. Half an hour later they reached the mainland, and Dick accompanied them to the point where the entrance to the island used by Marion for headquarters was located, so he would be able to find the spot again, if he wished to visit the camp. Then Dick bade them good-by, and struck out in the direction of the Morton home.

He made his way through the timber at a rapid pace, and twenty minutes later came in sight of the house, the moonlight making it plain to be seen, even though he was not yet quite out of the timber. Just as he was within ten feet of the open ground back of the stable Dick felt himself seized from behind, and a fierce voice hissed in his ear:

"Cursed dog of a rebel spy, your time has come!"

CHAPTER VII.

BLODGETT WARNS DICK.

Although taken entirely by surprise, Dick was not to be so easily disposed of. He began struggling with the energy of desperation.

His unknown assailant had drawn a knife, and now made a fierce lunge at the youth. Dick saw the weapon descending, however, and succeeded in catching his assailant by the wrist.

Then it became a contest of strength. The redcoat—for such the youth's assailant evidently was—made every effort to force the knife downward and sheathe it in Dick's body, but few, indeed, were they who could accomplish this, for the "Liberty Boy" was wonderfully strong. His was a grip of iron, and his arm was like a bar of steel, which was absolutely rigid, and could not be bent or broken.

Fierce curses escaped the lips of Dick's assailant, and he made desperate efforts to stab the youth to death; in his eagerness, he laid himself open to a counter attack, and Dick, knowing he was fighting for life, was quick to take advantage of it. He suddenly whirled his opponent over, gave a fierce, wrenching twist of the fellow's arm, and by a superhuman effort succeeded in imbedding the knife in the man's breast. A gasp, a gurgling groan, and the man's grasp relaxed, and he straightened out—dead! The point of the knife had found his heart, and ended the matter very quickly.

Dick rose to his feet, and looked down upon the face of the dead man. As he did so, an exclamation escaped him. "It is the spy who was dressed in women's clothes and called himself Hannah Muggs!" Dick cried. "Now if another attempt is made on my life I will know that he, as Hannah Muggs, was not the masked woman!"

Dick made his way to the house and knocked upon the door, which was opened by Daisy Morton.

"So you got home safely, did you?" said Dick. "I'm glad of that. I was afraid that something might have happened to you on the way back."

"Oh, it's you, is it?" cried Daisy. "I'm so glad. Yes, we got home safely. Come in, come in!—and, oh, did General Marion succeed in capturing those redcoats?"

"Yes," replied Dick as he entered the house; "we captured all of them excepting the commander."

"How happens it that you did not capture him?" asked Mr. Morton.

"He refused to be captured and insisted on being killed so General Marion cut his head off."

"Oh, oh!" cried the girls, in horror. "Did he really do that, Dick—Mr. Slater?" from Daisy.

"Yes," was the reply; "the British officer attacked him and General Marion was forced to protect himself. The redcoat insisted that it was a duel to the death, so the 'Swamp Fox' could not do otherwise than kill him."

"He did just right!" declared Mr. Morton.

"But, oh, it is so—horrible!" shuddered Agnes.

"There is nothing pleasant about war," said Dick.

"And you captured all the rest?" asked Mrs. Morton.

"Yes; we had them surrounded, and they did not dare offer to resist."

"Where are they now?" asked Mr. Morton.

"General Marion took them to his headquarters on an island in the swamp and will keep them prisoners there."

"Good! I am glad of that!" said Mr. Morton. "That was quite a strong blow to deal all at once, and may have the effect of forcing the redcoats to be more careful in future. They have been carrying things with quite a high hand around this neighborhood for a long time."

"We will soon be able to strike some stronger blows than that," said Dick, and then he went ahead and told them that five hundred patriot soldiers were coming down into that region to co-operate with Marion and Sumpter, for the purpose of giving the saucy redcoats a few well-needed lessons. "And, now," finished Dick, "I will, if you will permit me to do so, take up my quarters here and remain with you till the patriot soldiers sent by General Greene reach here."

"You're quite welcome to do so, Mr. Slater," said Mr. Morton.

"We shall be glad to have you remain," said Mrs. Morton.

"Yes, indeed!" exclaimed both girls, in unison.

Ten-year-old Sam didn't say anything, but if looks were anything to go by the knowledge that Dick was to remain for a while was pleasing to him the same as it was to the rest.

After half an hour spent in conversation, Dick asked Mr. Morton to step out of doors with him as he had something to say to him.

When they were outside Dick told of his encounter with the redcoat spy, and asked for a spade.

"There's one out at the stable," said Mr. Morton; "come along, I'll get it and will go along with you and help you bury the fellow."

Mr. Morton got the spade and then they made their way to where the dead body of the redcoat lay, and went to work. It did not take them long to dig the grave, and then rolling the body into the hole, they covered it over with dirt and leaves. This done, they returned to the house.

The other members of the family were evidently curious to know what the two had been doing, but they did not ask any questions, nor did Dick nor Mr. Morton offer any explanation.

It was now quite late, and all went to bed, Dick being given the "spare" room.

Next morning, soon after breakfast, Dick borrowed Mr. Morton's rifle and went out into the timber, hunting. "I may get a sight of my mysterious enemy, too," he said to himself; "she seems to have a liking for the timber. I'll keep my eyes open and try not to let her get another shot at me, for she might aim better, next time, and I don't want to end my life away down here in the South Carolina swamp region."

He did not have very good luck, hunting. Somehow the game was shy. Perhaps there had been too many hunting in the vicinity recently. Dick did not care particularly, however. He was out really more for the purpose of trying to learn something regarding the identity of the masked woman who desired his life, than for aught else.

Along about eleven o'clock he caught sight of a deer in an open space in the forest, and taking careful aim he fired. The deer leaped into the air and then fell dead; and Dick ran forward and drawing his knife, cut the jugular vein of the animal. As he straightened up he uttered an exclamation of amazement. Standing on the opposite side of the dead deer, leaning on the smoking muzzle of his rifle, was Joe, alias "Wolf" Blodgett, the man who had tried to murder him at the instance of the masked woman.

There was a peculiar, half-shamefaced grin on the man's face, and he nodded as Dick looked at him, and said, "Howdy!"

"How are you?" replied Dick, somewhat sternly. "What are you doing here? Trying to get another shot at me in the interests of that masked woman?"

"Not er bit uv et, young feller," Joe hastened to say; "I tole ye I wouldn't never shoot at ye ag'in, an' I meant ev'ry word uv et. Et hain't fur me ter kill ye, an' I won't try no more."

"That is sensible; but why are you here?"
Blodgett pointed to the dead deer.

"Ther same thing ez brought ye heer, I guess," he said; "I wuz arter this heer animile."

"Did you fire at it?" asked Dick, quickly.
"Yas; did ye?"

"Yes; but I heard only one report. We must have fired at exactly the same instant."

"I jedge so, young feller; an' now, le's see whose deer et is, ennyhow."

"Where were you when you fired?"

"Right over yender," and Blodgett pointed toward the spot.

"And I was right over there," pointing. "We both know just the position the deer was in when we fired, and it will be easy to see whose bullet did the work."

"Yas," then Blodgett knelt down and looked at the side of the deer that was uppermost, and pointed to a red spot just back of the foreleg.

"Thar's whur ye hit et," he said; "ye hev at least er ha'f intrust in ther critter, that's sartin."

Then he turned the carcass over and made an examination on the other side.

"Heer's whur I hit the varmint," he said, presently; "we mus' hev both put er bullet through et's heart. Waal, we'll hev ter fight, wrassle er run er foot race ter decide who's ter hev ther critter, I guess."

"Just give me one of the hind-quarters," said Dick, "and you may have the rest. I just want to take back something to show that I know a little something about hunting."

"All right; that's fa'r enuff. Yer er party squar' sort uv er feller, an' I'm mighty sorry I ever tried fur ter put er bullet through ye."

"Oh, that is all past and settled," said Dick; "don't let it worry you any more."

"All right, I won't; an' ez ye air sech er squar' feller with me, I'm ergoin' ter do ther fa'r thing by ye. Thar's ergoin' ter be er dance up at Morton's, whur ye air stoppin' ter-night, hain't there?"

Dick was surprised. "Not that I know of," he replied.

"Ye hedn't heerd ennythin' erbout et?"

"No."

"Waal, I met one uv the boys frum up ther crick, las' night, an' he said ez how thar wuz goin' ter be er dance at ther Morton home ter-night."

"None of them said anything to me."

"They furgot et, then, er wanted ter s'prise ye."

"Perhaps so."

"Thar hain't no doubt whutever erbout et; an' now I'm goin' ter give ye jes' er word uv warnin': Look out fur yerself!"

"Look out for myself?"

"Yas."

"At the dance?"

"Yas."

"You think that I will be in danger?"

"Thet's jes' whut I think."

Dick was interested. He looked at Blodgett, searchingly.

"Who will I be in danger from?" he asked.

"Ye know."

"You mean——"

"Ther myster'ous masked woman!"

"You think she will be at the dance?"

"Yas."

"But I will be able to see her before she can do me any harm."

The giant shook his head.

"I don' know erbout that," he said, slowly.

"You don't know about it?"

"No."

"What do you mean?"

Blodgett hesitated. Then he said, slowly:

"I meen that I don't think she'll hev er mask on at ther dance!"

"Oh!"

Dick understood. Blodgett had more knowledge of the mysterious masked woman than he wished to acknowledge. He either knew who she was or suspected her identity. Dick decided to try to worm the secret out of him. Stepping forward he laid his hand on the giant's shoulder.

"See here, Blodgett," he said, sternly, "you know who that woman is, and I want you to tell me!"

"No, I don't, so he'p me!" the fellow protested.

"Blodgett!"

"I dunno who she is—I sw'ar et, young feller!" the giant hastened to say. He was trembling, and it was evident that he was afraid of the young fellow who had such a firm grip on his shoulder. Doubtless the superstition that was in his nature made Blodgett afraid, for he did not look or act like a coward, ordinarily. His failure to hit Dick when he had had a good chance to take aim, had broken his nerve, in so far as the youth was concerned, and he doubtless believed that he could not injure the young man even if he were to try his best.

Dick decided that the man was speaking the truth; he did not know who the woman was—but he undoubtedly had suspicions. Dick accused him of this, and tried to get him to tell whom he suspected, but Blodgett demurred and refused to say anything more than to again warn the youth to keep his eyes wide open and lookout for himself at the dance.

"All right; I will be on my guard," said Dick. "And I thank you for giving me this warning. I should have been entirely unsuspecting, of course, and might have fallen an easy victim."

"Yer won't be safe, none of ther time at ther dance," declared Joe; "an' ye'll hev ter be mighty keerful an' wide awake ef ye git through erlive—leastwise, that's my way uv thinkin'."

"Thanks to your warning, I think I shall be able to do o, Blodgett," said Dick. Then bidding the giant good-y, the youth shouldered the hind-quarter of the deer—which Joe had cut out for him—and started for the Morton home.

He reached there at just about noon, and when he showed he deer's hind-quarter as proof that he was a successful hunter, they complimented him highly. The larder was just about empty, so far as fresh meat was concerned, so Mrs. Morton said, and the deer meat would be very acceptable.

Dinner was ready, and they had waited a few minutes for him to put in an appearance, so they sat down and ate it once. While at the table the girls told Dick that there was to be a dance at their house that night.

"And, oh, I hope that you dance, Mr. Slater!" said Daisy.

"Yes, I dance some," the youth replied; "in fact, I may say that I enjoy it very much."

"I am glad of that."

CHAPTER VIII.

WHO THE MYSTERIOUS MASKED WOMAN WAS.

The young folks began to arrive at about eight o'clock, and came in rapidly after that, until by half-past eight there were twenty couples there, at least, not counting the members of the Morton household.

Agnes and Daisy plumed themselves on having such a distinguished visitor at their house as Dick Slater, the famous patriot, scout, spy and captain of the "Liberty Boys," and they introduced the youth to the young people as fast as they came in, and Dick was soon well acquainted with the majority, as under such circumstances was natural.

Nettie Thompson was there, she having come with her brother Tom, and Dick made it a point to greet the girl, for there was something about her that attracted him, notwithstanding the fact that she had refused to shake hands with him when introduced to him by her father, and had treated him rather coldly during the time he had been at the home of her parents.

The girl greeted him in a more pleasant way than she had ever done before, and he said to himself that she was a very sweet girl, indeed. He thought that she seemed to be somewhat nervous and excited, however, and then he thought of what her father had told him—how she had

acted queerly at times since her twin brother was killed—and felt kindly toward her.

The big, front room had been cleared of all furniture that would be in the way, and the dancing was to be in that room. A negro, with a fiddle, took up his position in one corner, and began playing; and soon the dancing was in full blast. Dick asked Nettie to dance with him, and they took their place in a "set," and were soon dancing a quadrille. Nettie was a good dancer, light and graceful, and Dick was delighted. He enjoyed the dancing immensely, as did all the rest, seemingly, for mirth was the order of the hour.

Daisy and Agnes Morton were somewhat jealous of Nettie Thompson, and did not like it when Dick asked her for the first dance. "He might have asked me, I think!" said Daisy. "He is our guest, and ought to have given me the first dance."

"Or me!" said Agnes. "I think he should have danced with me, in preference to you, as I am the elder. At any rate, he ought to have danced with one or the other of us first."

"That's what I think."

Dick selected Daisy for the next dance, however, and then for the next, Agnes; and this appeased their wrath to a considerable extent, and they smiled upon him.

The fun was fast and furious till midnight, and then supper was announced. Dick took Nettie in to the table, and as Daisy and Agnes were to wait on the guests they did not feel so hurt on this account. There was really no one else he could have taken, anyway, as all the other girls had beaux.

After an hour of talking and laughing the dancing was resumed and was kept up till two o'clock, when something happened to disturb the enjoyment of the occasion.

Dick had just finished a waltz with Nettie, and had taken a seat by her side at one side of the room. Some one called to him and he turned his head to speak; scarcely had he done so when he heard a shrill scream right at his side, followed by another, and then the sound of a struggle. He whirled back just as a wild chorus of screams went up from the throats of the girls, and saw Nettie Thompson and Daisy Morton struggling with each other. Then to his astonishment and horror he noticed that there was an ugly-looking knife in Nettie's hands, and fearing that she might cut Daisy with it he leaped forward and seized the girl by the wrist and held it firmly.

"She—tried—to—kill—you!" panted Daisy; "she—would have—if I hadn't—caught her arm! She—must be—crazy!"

"Let go of her now, Miss Daisy," said Dick, gently; "she has fainted."

And, indeed, this was true. The knife dropped to the floor and the girl would have done so, too, had not Dick caught her in his arms and held her up. Everybody was wildly excited, with the single exception of Dick, and the girls were chattering like magpies, their teeth rattling together, so great was their fright and excitement; while the young men stood staring stupidly at the youth and the insensible girl.

"Is there some place we can take her till she comes to, Mrs. Morton?" asked Dick.

"Yes, yes; right in here," replied the good woman, leading the way into her own bedroom, which was on the ground floor.

Dick followed and placed the unconscious girl on the bed and called for water and a towel. These were brought, quickly, and then, aided by Mrs. Morton, Dick bathed the girl's face. She soon came to and then as soon as her eyes fell on Dick's face she covered her own face with her hands and sobbed as if her heart would break.

"Don't cry!" said Dick, soothingly; "there is no need of it."

The girl continued sobbing for a few minutes, and then gradually stopped. Finally she took her hands from in front of her face, and holding them toward Dick, said:

"Oh, can you—will you forgive me for—for—"

"There, there!" said Dick, gently; "I can and do forgive you, freely, fully! Don't think of the matter again."

A happy look appeared on the girl's face. "Oh, I am so glad—so glad!" she murmured. Then she added, after a few moments; "I wish to go home; will you—will you—accompany me? I—I have something to—say to you; an explanation to make. Will you come with me?"

"Of course—gladly!" said Dick; "but are you strong enough to walk? Shall I not take you home in one of the conveyances?"

"No, no! I am strong enough to walk—I want to walk. I wish to talk to you and—explain my—my strange conduct."

"Very well; get ready, and I will go with you, Miss Nettie."

The girl was soon ready, and having sent Tom ahead, she and Dick set out, leaving a wondering crowd of young people behind them.

The instant they had gone there was a babel of tongues.

"How strange!"

"How terrible!"

"To think that she tried—tried to—to murder him!"

"She must be crazy!"

I always thought her queer!"

Such are a few of the hundreds of exclamations and remarks made by the boys and girls. Of course it was only natural that they should talk, as the affair was very unusual and startling.

Daisy and ~~Agnes~~ were the most put out of any of the girls present. To think that he would go home with her after she tried to murder him," said ~~Agnes~~, a frown on her face.

"And to not stop to say a word to me—me, who—who saved his life!" said Daisy. "I almost wish I had let her kill him, so I do. I know she loves him, and thought he loved me, and did it because she was jealous—the mean thing!"

"I think he ought not to have gone home with her, after the way she acted, at any rate," said ~~Agnes~~.

"What if she was to kill him while they were on the way!" suddenly exclaimed Daisy, paling. "She's a sly minx, and there is no knowing but it was a scheme to get to do what she failed to do in the first attempt."

"Do you think so, Daisy?"

"I don't think so, particularly; but it may be possible."

"Then some of the boys had better follow them."

"I think so."

The girls suggested this to some of the young men, but they hooted at the idea. "It would be foolish," one said; "she won't try it again. It was a sudden, crazy idea that took possession of her, and she won't attempt it a second time. Dick would be mad if we were to follow them."

So Daisy and ~~Agnes~~ had to be satisfied, and let matters rest.

Meanwhile Dick and Nettie were making their way slowly along the road in the direction of the girl's home. For a few minutes not a word was spoken, and then presently Nettie gave utterance to a sigh, and looking up at Dick, said:

"You must have a very poor opinion of me, Mr. Slater, after—after I—tried to—to—"

The girl stammered and stopped.

"Don't say a word about that, Miss Thompson—Nettie," said Dick gently. "I shall dismiss it from my mind, and you must do the same."

"But I must explain, Mr. Slater—Dick. May I call you by that name?"

"Yes, yes! Don't call me 'Mr. Slater.'"

"Thank you, Dick. I will now explain why I tried to—to—"

"Don't say anything more about that," said Dick gently.

"Very well. Dick, did father tell you that I once had a twin brother, Ned, and that he was killed while up in Virginia with the army of Cornwallis?"

"Yes, he told me, Nettie," replied Dick, wondering what was coming.

"Well, I loved Ned as few sisters love their brothers, Dick, and when I heard that he was dead—that he had been killed, murdered in a duel, by a—a—rebel spy who—who had been in the British encampment masquerading as a soldier of the king, I—I—was overcome with grief, and I registered a vow that if ever the opportunity caine I would be revenged upon the one who killed my brother, by killing him, or having him killed."

The girl's voice at times rang out with excitement and feeling, but at the close it sank to a low, tremulous tone. As he listened a strange thought entered Dick's mind.

"Nettie," he said, stopping and facing the girl, who stopped, also, and gazed into his face inquiringly, "what was the name of the rebel spy who killed your brother?"

The girl hesitated. She looked at Dick for a few moments in silence, and then, bursting into tears, said: "His name, so I was told, was—Dick Slater!"

Nettie was almost blinded by the tears, and she put up her hands and, groping in the air, would have fallen had not Dick caught her in his arms. The youth held the trembling form firmly, and spoke to the girl gently.

"There, there! Don't cry, Nettie," he said. "Listen to me. I swear to you that I did not kill your brother! I am a patriot, and have been in the British encampments, and played the part of a soldier of the king on various occasions, while doing spy work for the great cause, and I have, too, on one or two occasions, fought duels with British soldiers, but I have a good memory, and know that I never fought with any one of the name of Ned Thompson. Do you believe me, Nettie?"

The girl stopped sobbing, and nestling closer to the youth, said, in a voice in which joy and relief were commingled: "Yes, I believe you—Dick."

"That is right, little girl," said Dick. "I am innocent of the killing of your brother, and now, to repay you for the sorrow my name has caused you for so long a time, I am going to do something. I am going to be a brother to you, Nettie, in place of the one you have lost. How will you like that?"

"I'll—like—it, Dick," was the reply in a muffled voice, and the youth felt a sudden cessation of the tremor which had been shaking the girl's form.

Dick was silent for a few moments, and then said: "Give me a kiss, Nettie, to seal the compact, and make us brother and sister."

A sudden tremor went over the girl's form, and for a few moments she did not make a movement; then she slowly lifted her tear-wet face till she could look in Dick's

eyes, and put up her sweet, rosebud mouth. Then, as the youth took the kiss, Nettie's eyes drooped, and had it been light enough Dick would have seen the rich, glowing color come into the girl's cheeks.

"Little sister!" said Dick gently.

"My—brother!" murmured the girl.

Then Dick released her, and asked: "Who told you that the person who killed your brother was named Dick Slater?"

"I hardly know who it did come from in the first place, Dick. I used to talk to the soldiers when they came past, and one day, when I was talking with an officer, and told him that my brother had been killed in a duel with a patriot spy, he said that he knew all about it, and that the spy's name was Dick Slater."

"Well, he either deliberately told a falsehood, or else did not know what he was talking about," said Dick. "I have, as I told you, fought one or two duels with British soldiers, but in neither instance have I killed my opponent; so it could not have been I who killed your brother."

"True; and, oh, I'm so glad!"

They started onward, walking slowly, and presently Dick said:

"I want you to promise me something, Nettie."

"What is it, Dick?"

"That you give up this idea of revenging yourself on the person who killed your brother. Will you promise?"

"Yes, yes, Dick!" with a shudder. "I will never, never again think of such a thing. Just think how near I came to—to killing you, who were entirely innocent! Oh!" and again a shudder shook the girl's form.

At last they reached Nettie's home, and found that all was quiet there. Tom, who had gone on ahead, had been warned by Dick to say nothing about what had transpired at the dance, and the boy had obeyed. They paused out by the road.

"One question before I go," said Dick. "Were you the mysterious masked woman, Nettie?"

"Yes, Dick," was the reply. "Do you remember the woman, Hannah Muggs, who was at our house the other night when you were there?"

"Yes, I remember."

"Well, that was a man—a British spy, in disguise. He had learned that I wished to get revenge on Dick Slater for killing my brother, and he came to me at noon of the day before you came, and told me that he had information to the effect that you would come along this road past my home some time next day. I don't know how he secured his information, for he did not tell me. I was excited by the news, and that evening I went to the cabin of Joe Blod-

gett, and gave him two pounds in gold to lay in wait for you next day, and kill you. I masked myself, as I did not wish any one to know what I had done." The girl's voice trembled, and suddenly she broke down and burst into tears. "Oh, Dick," she sobbed, "how can you ever forgive me? It was so—so—terrible! But, oh, Dick, I—I—really think I—I must have been out of my mind! I don't understand, now, how I could ever have done such a thing!"

Dick took the girl gently in his arms, and kissed her. "Don't say or think anything more about it, Nettie," he said softly. "Remember that now you are my own sweet little sister, and that all that has passed is in the past, and is to not be thought of or spoken of again. Good-night, little sister."

The girl put up her mouth for another kiss, and then with a low-voiced "Good-night, my—brother!" she gently disengaged herself from Dick's arms and ran to the house. She opened the door, turned and waved her hand to the youth standing there, and then entered the house and closed the door.

Putting the bar in place, she stole silently upstairs and to her room, and then, throwing herself face downward on her bed, she wept as if her heart was broken, while over and over in her mind went the thought: "My brother! He will be my brother—only my brother—and I love him so! Oh, I love him so!"

Meanwhile Dick was striding rapidly along toward the home of the Mortons. He soon reached there, and found that, while none of the young folks had taken their departure, the dancing had stopped.

Dick knew that they had remained in the hope that they might find out what had caused Nettie Thompson to make the attempt on his life, and he decided that it would be best to tell them. He did so, explaining the matter fully, and when he had finished, the anger which all had felt toward the girl was turned to pity and compassion.

Many expressions of sorrow and sympathy for her were heard on every side.

As nothing serious had happened, and as their curiosity had been fully satisfied, the young people bade Mr. Morton's folks and Dick Slater good-night—or good-morning, rather—and took their departure, well satisfied.

Perhaps the only persons not wholly satisfied with the night's doings were Daisy and Agnes Morton. Late as it was when they went to bed, they lay awake and talked of what had taken place.

"I tell you I believe Nettie Thompson loves Dick Slater," said Daisy, in a dissatisfied tone of voice.

"I don't see how you can think that, Daisy," dissented

Agnes. "She wouldn't have tried to kill him if she loved him, would she?"

"Yes; she's queer in her head, you know, and even though she loves, she could not resist her crazy inclination to kill him, thinking as she did that he had killed her brother Ned. There was love in her eyes, even as she drew back to stab him with the knife—I saw it, and I know it!"

"I hardly think so, Daisy."

"I am sure of it; but I don't think it will do her any good, for—did you see him when he thanked me for saving his life, ~~the other day~~? Oh, he talked just awfully nice. Do you know, ~~the other day~~, I more than half believe he's in love with me."

"Don't be too sure of it, Daisy."

Daisy made no reply just then, but presently, after a few moments of silence, she said as if speaking to herself:

"I do wish he hadn't walked home with Nettie Thompson."

Then the girls fell asleep.

CHAPTER IX.

SHOWING THE REDCOATS HOW TO FIGHT.

Two days have passed, and there is great excitement in the neighborhood in which the Morton home is located.

The five hundred men sent by General Greene have arrived and the patriot residents of the neighborhood are delighted.

"Now we will see whether or not the redcoats can come up here and do just as they please," they told one another; "Generals Marion, Sumpter and their men, in connection with these soldiers, will be able to make it lively for any force of redcoats that may come this way. They will show the British how to fight!"

To Dick's great delight his "Liberty Boys" were among the men who had been sent by General Greene. The youths were all delighted to see Dick again, and were delighted, as well, by the prospects of some lively fighting with the redcoats.

Generals Marion and Sumpter were now together at the island in the swamp where Marion had his headquarters. They had, between them, one hundred and seventy men, and the five hundred men sent by Greene, who at once joined them on the island, increased their force to quite a respectable little army. Dick told Marion that he thought there would be no difficulty in securing forty or fifty recruits among the patriot young men of the vicinity, and

his would run the army up to a force of more than seven hundred.

"With such a force, we ought to be able to strike the British some hard blows," said General Marion.

"Yes, indeed!" agreed General Sumpter.

Dick and the other officers who were members of the council thought and said the same, and a plan of campaign was talked over and decided upon.

The only way to do, it was decided, was to draw the British out from Charleston by some pretext of a move in one direction, and then attack them from some other direction. To do this it would be necessary to get word to him that the fake move was to be made. This, Dick said he thought he could accomplish successfully.

"There are a number of Tory families in the neighborhood who have young men sons, and I can contrive so that the word of our intended move gets to one of these young men and he will take the first opportunity to carry the news to the British in Charleston. They will then come out to make an attack upon us and we will be enabled to take them from the rear and at a disadvantage and give them a good thrashing."

Generals Marion and Sumpter thought this would be a good plan, and it was decided that the move which they would pretend that they were going to make was to go to another settlement, five miles distant, and make an attack on the Tories who were thick in that vicinity. This matter decided, Dick took his departure for the purpose of doing his part of the work.

Leaving the headquarters in the swamp, Dick made his way to the home of a patriot whose name was Saunders. Mr. and Mrs. Saunders had a son named Joe, a youth of nineteen years, and a bright, shrewd young fellow whom Dick knew he could trust.

Dick told Joe just what he wanted, and the patriot youth said that he could fix the thing up all right.

"We have a Tory neighbor up the road just a little ways, Dick," he said; "they have a boy of about my age, and he is a rabid Tory, too. If I can contrive to let slip the statement that the patriot force that is here is going over to the 'Corners' neighborhood to give the Tories over there a lesson, he will take the news to the British at Charleston at once."

"Good! I shall depend upon you to do this, Joe," said Dick.

"I'll attend to it. When shall I say the patriot force intends moving to the 'Corners'?"

"Say that we are going over there day after to-morrow."

"Day after to-morrow, eh?"

"Yes; that will give the Tory youth time to get the news to the British."

"All right; I will see to it that the news gets to him, and I haven't the least doubt that the news will then very quickly get to the redcoats."

"Good! That is what we want. And, by the way, Joe, do you want to join us and go over and help give the redcoats a thrashing when we go?"

"Of course I do, Dick!"

"All right; we shall be glad to have you, and any more of the boys of the neighborhood who may care to go."

"I can get fifty of the boys to go along, Dick!" eagerly.

"All right; pass the word to them and be ready, early, day after to-morrow morning."

"We'll be ready."

Then Dick went onward to call on the Mortons and Thompsons.

Soon after he had gone, Joe made some excuse to go over to his Tory neighbor's home. The boy in question, whose name was Sam Hinkle, was out in the barn lot. Joe approached him, and after asking to borrow a saw, got to talking about the coming of the patriot soldiers from the North. He managed to let slip, seeming, without intending to do so, the fact that Dick Slater had just told him that the patriot force was to go over to the "Corners," the day after to-morrow, and teach the Tories of that neighborhood a lesson.

As soon as he had let this slip, Joe caught himself, looked confused and made Sam promise not to mention what he had learned to a soul, and, of course, Sam promised. Joe was scarcely out of the barn lot, however, before he rushed to the house and told his parents what Joe had said.

"You must get to Charleston at once and let the commandant know of this, Sam!" exclaimed his father, excitedly, and Sam said he would do so.

"Wait half an hour or so, Sam," his father went on, "and then saddle Moscow and ride like the wind to Charleston."

"All right, father; I will."

And he did. Three-quarters of an hour later he rode away at a gallop, his horse headed southward, and Joe Saunders, who was peering around the corner of the stable, grinned a satisfied grin and murmured:

"There goes the news to the commandant at Charleston. I have done my part, as regards that; now to pass the word to the boys to be ready to go with the patriot force day after to-morrow morning."

Then he saddled his horse and set out, going in a different direction from that taken by Sam, for he did not wish the youth's parents to think he might be following him.

The last-named youth did not spare his horse. He obeyed his father, literally, in that he really did ride "like the wind" to Charleston. And when he told the commandant there the wonderful news, there was excitement among the British. Sam was complimented for his good work in coming with the information, and was feasted and made much of. Had the redcoats known that he was a mere cat'spaw, doing the very work which the patriots intended he should do, they would not have been so delighted, and Sam would not have been feasted and patted on the back. They did not know it, however, and the youth came in for a lot of enjoyment such as he had never expected would fall to his lot.

The British at once began making arrangements to go to the "Corners" on the day after to-morrow, and give the impudent "rebels" a thorough trouncing. The commandant thought it would be possible to sweep Marion and Sumpter and the patriot force out of existence at one fell blow, and he was highly elated. The "Swamp Fox" and Sumpter and their ragged, but desperate men, had given him lots of trouble, and now he would get even with them.

And while the British were making their preparations, Marion and Sumpter and their men and Dick Slater and his "Liberty Boys" were making their preparations to make it warm for the enemy. They succeeded in getting all their plans perfected, and there was not the least doubt in the minds of any of them that they would succeed in their undertaking.

Early in the morning of the day decided upon the entire patriot force, more than seven hundred strong—the patriot youths of the neighborhood to the number of fifty having joined them—marched away, heading toward the "Corners." This was to deceive the Tories of the vicinity, who were undoubtedly watching every movement of the patriot army.

The march was kept up toward the eastward a distance of three miles, and then, instead of going straight on to the "Corners," the force turned southward and marched in this direction a mile. Then another turn was made toward the east, and at a point half a mile from the main road leading northward into the "Corners," the patriots paused and took up their position in a strip of timber which extended on across to the road. It was along this road that it was expected that the British would advance, and it transpired that they were right in thinking thus, for about ten o'clock the enemy came in sight, coming from the southward. It marched, a thousand strong, straight onward, up the road, past where the patriots were hidden, and then still on toward the "Corners." And then the patriots moved; stealing along through the timber they

kept abreast with the redcoats and then, just before the cross-roads store was reached—this building having the honor of being called the "Corners"—the patriots burst out of the timber and attacked the redcoats with terrible fury.

It was indeed warm work, but by taking the British by surprise the patriots more than evened up the odds against them—which were not so very great, they having seven hundred men as opposed to one thousand.

Dick Slater and his "Liberty Boys" were now in their element. Marion and Sumpter had heard a great deal about the youths and their terrible valor on the battlefield and while they had never doubted the truth of the stories they had heard, they had had no idea that the youths were such terrors as they were. The "Swamp Fox" and Sumpter, as well, had not believed it possible that any youths or men for that matter, could outfight their terrible veteran fighters, but to-day they were forced to acknowledge that in "The Liberty Boys of '76" their men had met their masters as desperate fighters.

The "Liberty Boys" were here, there and everywhere, and they fought like demons, their wild, thrilling war-cry of "Down with the king! Long live Liberty!" ringing out almost constantly. The men under Marion and Sumpter, urged to exert themselves by the example set them by the youths, fought desperately, also, and took up the thrilling war-cry of the youths.

The redcoats, attacked with terrible fury, were scattered and divided up into a dozen parties, each being engaged by almost an equal number of patriot soldiers. One party concentrated near the "Corners" store building, and the battle was waged fast and furious here. The "Liberty Boys" turned their attention to this party, which numbered about a hundred, and then there was warm work!

The redcoats thought they could fight the "rebels" off, but the "Liberty Boys" charged with such irresistible fury that the British were forced to retreat into the house.

The battle raged for nearly an hour longer, but the redcoats were at last completely routed and scattered and demoralized they started in full retreat toward Charleston.

When it was over it was found that nearly three hundred of the British had been killed or wounded and eighty of the hundred who had taken refuge in the "Corners" house were captured. Of the patriots, twenty had been killed and thirty wounded; of these, four killed and ten wounded were "Liberty Boys."

But it had been a great victory, and the patriots were delighted. They certainly had a right to be.

The plan had been a great success. From its inception to the wind-up there had not been a quirk or bobble of any kind; it had gone through just as planned.

The British were so thoroughly thrashed that they did not return to have it out with their enemy; they continued right straight on southward toward Charleston, and when they reached there they had a great story to tell. They said that they had been set upon by at least two thousand men and that it was only the wonderful fighting abilities and the known bull-dog qualities of the British soldiers that had enabled them to get back to Charleston with the bulk of the force which had that morning left there.

The commandant did not for a moment doubt the truth of these statements. He could not have been made believe that his veteran soldiers had been whipped by a force of "rebels" numerically smaller than his own force. Naturally, he was wild with rage, and sputtered and threatened what he would do to the audacious "rebels" for what they had that day done.

He at once began marshalling all his available force, amounting to about fifteen hundred men, and early next morning he set out at the head of the little army, intent on finding the patriot force and administering to it such a thrashing as would have the effect of more than offsetting the British defeat of the day before.

Marion and Sumpter were as wary as foxes, however, and were not to be taken by surprise. They expected that the British commandant would make a move of this kind, and were prepared for it. They had scouts out who came in and reported the approach of the British while yet the enemy was several miles distant, and the two old fighters had plenty of time to chose their ground and arrange their men to their satisfaction. The result was that when the redcoats made the attack they at the same time made a sad mistake. The patriot force had the advantage of position and perfect knowledge of the ground, and in two hours time, the British were even more thoroughly whipped than had been the case the previous day.

The British commandant returned to Charleston, minus a goodly portion of his army. He was a sadder and wiser man, and he had learned that the hated "rebels" knew how to fight. In fact, he was forced to acknowledge that they were capable of showing his boasted veterans how to fight.

Dick and his "Liberty Boys" were greatly pleased, and they remained in the vicinity of Charleston for some time,

co-operating with Marion and Sumpter, and doing much toward making life a burden to the British.

Their names became famous throughout that part of South Carolina—and, indeed, throughout all the State, and redcoats and Tories alike learned to tremble at the mere mention of the "Liberty Boys."

While in the vicinity Dick was a frequent caller at the homes of the Mortons and the Thompsons. Dick liked the jolly and lively Morton girls, Daisy and Alice—and while he suspected that they thought a good deal of him, he felt that their dispositions and temperaments were such that they were not likely to learn to like him so strongly as to cause them any very great heart-burnings.

With Nettie Thompson, however, it was different. Dick was shrewd enough to see that she was learning to like him more than he wished her to—for he did not wish her to undergo suffering caused by unrequited love—and he made it in his way to throw her into the company of Joe Saunders as much as was possible. Dick had seen that Joe was in love with Nettie, and knowing that he was a splendid fellow, hoped to be able to make a match between them. When this had progressed to some extent, Dick one day told Nettie about his sweetheart, Alice Estabrook, and after that he was pleased to see that she paid more attention to Joe and gave him encouragement.

We may as well state here that two years later Dick received an invitation to the wedding of Joe Saunders and Nettie Thompson, and when Dick told Alice Estabrook the story of Nettie Thompson, the tender-hearted girl shed tears of sympathy and whispered:

"I'm glad she's happy now, Dick!"

THE END.

The next number (57) of "The Liberty Boys of '76" will contain "THE LIBERTY BOYS' 'PUSH'; OR, BOUND TO GET THERE," by Harry Moore.

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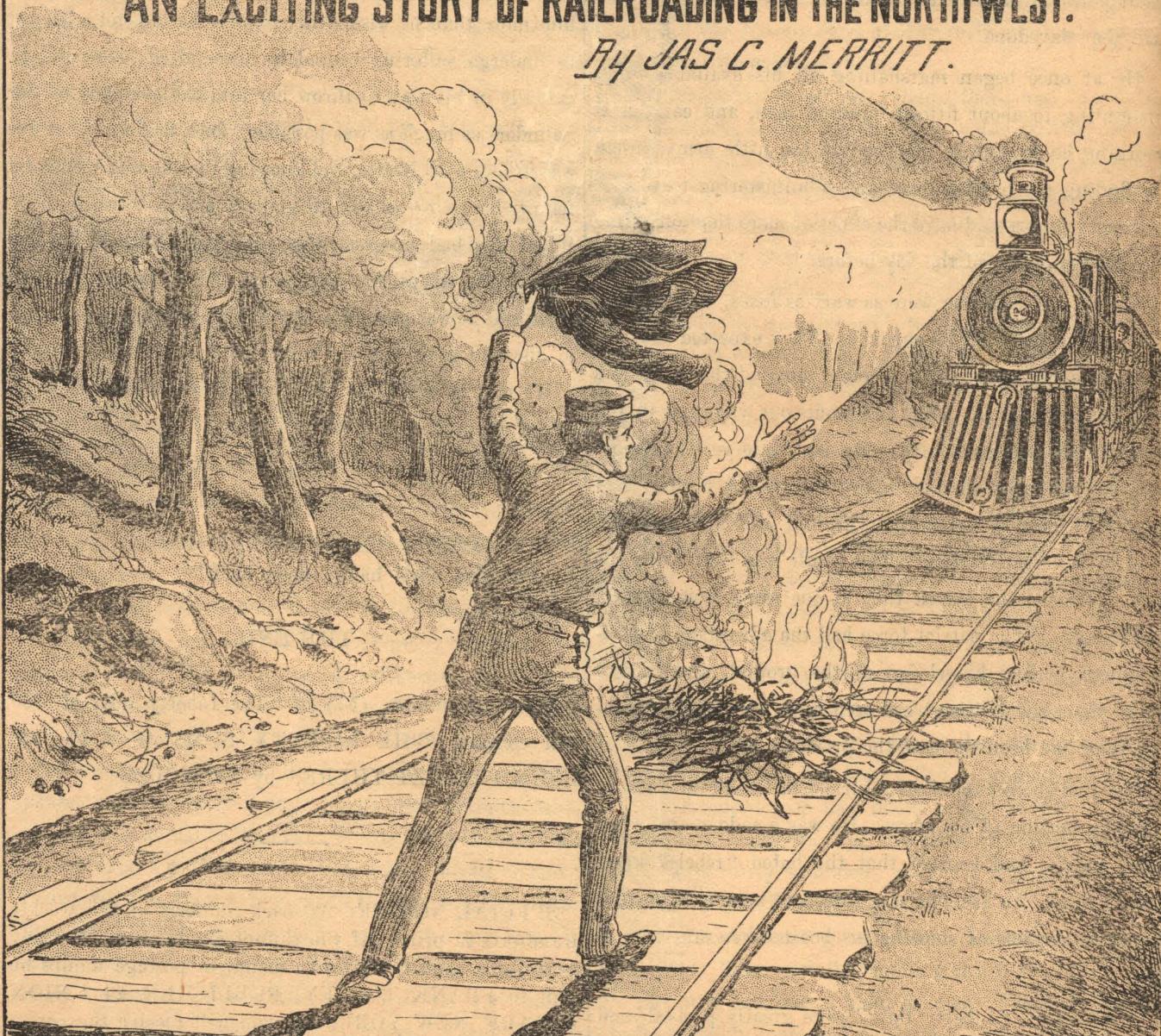
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